FALLING
A STORY BY HIPSTATEASEE

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01

Carson Hughes

It was the end of August and the air was thick and sticky with moisture like the inside of a bathroom with the hot shower running. The golden light from the setting sun blinded me as I drove past the trees on the open road. I would give my damn arm for the air conditioner to work in this car. Maybe then my skin wouldn't be uncomfortably sticking to the leather interior.

The last week of summer had snuck up on me faster than I would have liked. There was no way I was ready to start school and suffer through long days of sitting in saunas for classrooms until the temperature finally started to cool down.

I hated the summer heat, that was for sure.

My car creaked as I came to a stop in front of my house. It looked exactly the same since I left it to work at the summer camp two months ago. It had the same hideous yellow paint entirely covering it and I was sure there was still a chip by the door where I had accidentally knocked the shovel into the house over the winter.

Once parked, I heaved myself out of the car and grabbed my bags to bring them inside. When I entered the house, a pleasant rush of cold air formed goosebumps on my skin.

"Carson!" my mother exclaimed, tossing her arms around me as she met me at the doorway. "I'm so glad you're home!"

I chuckled and let out a content sigh. "I'm glad to be home."

Mom parted from me only briefly before placing her hands on my cheeks, a wide smile taking over her face as she stared at me.

"You must've gotten even more handsome," she said, lightly pinching my cheek.

"Ma," I complained, placing my hand over her's.

"What? Let me look at you! I haven't seen you since June!"

I sighed, but I couldn't keep the smile from creeping onto my face.

"Okay," Mom said, finally releasing me. "I took tomorrow off so we could spend some time together. You should go hang out with your friends tonight. Logan Taylor's been waiting for you to get home."

The mention of my best friend piqued my interest. I hadn't been able to properly talk to any of my friends all summer except for a few texts here and there. There was barely any service at the summer camp and we weren't really supposed to be on our phones anyway.

"Has he come around?" I asked, the two of us walking toward the living room.

Mom nodded. "He mowed the lawn all summer."

"That was nice of him," I replied. "Hope you didn't pay him too much."

"Are you kidding? He didn't even want to take the money," she responded.

"I'm going to go give him a call," I told her, nodding my head toward the stairs.

Once I was up in my room, I set my bags down and pulled my phone out of my pocket to dial Logan. He was quick to answer.

"Carson! Are you home yet, bro?" Logan answered the phone.

"Just pulled in," I replied, taking a seat on my bed.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. "Hasn't been the same without you."

I lightly laughed and looked up at the ceiling. "Hope you didn't miss me too much."

"Yeah, yeah. Come to mine tonight. I'll have everyone over," Logan suggested.

"Sounds like a plan," I responded.

"Great. Come as soon as you can."

And with that, Logan hung up.

Before heading to Logan's house, I spent some time unpacking my things and putting them away. Once I finished with that, I showered and got dressed then made my way to Logan's.

By the time I got there it looked like some of my other friends had already arrived. Logan was quick to come to the door and embrace me after I knocked.

"We missed you, bro," Logan said after releasing me.

"I missed you guys too."

Logan led me to the basement where we usually hung out when we all got together. I was greeted by Dana, Logan's girlfriend, first. Then my other friends, Isaac, Archie, and Hadley said their hellos.

"How was being a working man all summer?" Hadley asked in a friendly tone.

"It was actually kinda nice," I told her as we sat down together on the couch. "I didn't have to buy anything all summer so I have all of that money saved up."

"So what I'm hearing is you're rich," Isaac joked.

I laughed along with the rest of my friends. "Not quite."

"Did anything interesting happen while I was gone?" I asked the group.

As soon as the question came out of my mouth, Archie burst out into laughter and exaggeratedly nodded his head, looking over at Logan who shot him a pointed look.

"What happened?" I directed toward Logan. He just let out a sigh as Archie continued to laugh.

"It's not funny, Arch," Hadley scolded him.

"Vinny came out," Archie finally let out.

My eyes widened. "What?"

My heart hammered in my chest at what Archie was insinuating. I had known I was gay for quite some time now, and I had never thought of there being another gay kid in this town. I didn't know if the thought frightened or excited me.

"Vinny's gay," Logan clarified, shooting daggers at Archie. "Which *isn't funny* ."

"Come on, you know I'm not laughing at him being gay," Archie said. "Tell Carson how you found out, I bet he'll be laughing too."

Logan's face tinged pink and I couldn't tell if it was out of embarrassment or annoyance. Probably a bit of both.

"How did you find out?" I questioned with my eyebrows raised.

Logan sighed and looked up at the ceiling before back at me.

"I walked in on him having sex with a dude," Logan muttered, shuddering at the memory.

I couldn't help but let a laugh escape my lips and that earned a hard scowl from my best friend.

Vinny Taylor was always a quiet kid, pretty much the opposite of his brother Logan. Well, the two weren't actually brothers. They were cousins, but Vinny was adopted by Logan's family at a young age.

He and Logan were always pretty close, so it was surprising to hear that Vinny hadn't actually *told* Logan about his sexuality.

"It's not funny," Dana reminded the group, placing her hand on Logan's shoulder.

"He's barely talked to me since," Logan sadly confessed.

"Maybe he's just embarrassed?" I guessed with a shrug.

Logan shook his head. "No, I think it's something else. His friends haven't been over in a while. I don't think he's seen them."

I sent Logan a sympathetic look.

Later on, Logan and I were the only two left in the basement.

"Why don't you just stay over?" Logan suggested, looking over at me.

I nodded and let out a yawn. "That's probably a good idea."

The two of us got up from the couch and made our way upstairs into the living room where we saw Logan's dad standing in front of the TV. He leaned down to pick up the remote and shut it off and then turned to look at someone who was asleep on the couch. Vinny Taylor.

"Is he okay?" Logan asked in a quiet tone, looking down at his brother.

His dad nodded, sending a quick wave my way. "I just don't know if I should wake him up to get him to his room or let him sleep down here."

"Just leave him," Logan answered.

I took my chance to look down at the sleeping boy. His dark hair fell over his forehead and his mouth was partially opened and he breathed deeply in

his sleep. He and Logan shared little resemblance, but their relation was clear.

"Come on, Carson," Logan whispered, nodding his head toward the stairs and tearing my attention away from the sleeping Vinny.

"So he doesn't talk to you anymore?" I asked once we were in Logan's bedroom.

Logan let out a sigh and shrugged his shoulders. "He talks to me sometimes, but not about anything important."

"Do you ever try to talk to him?"

Logan sat down on his bed. "I gave up."

"Maybe there's something seriously wrong with him," I told Logan with wide eyes. "You can't just give up."

Logan sighed and put his head in his hands. "I just don't know what his problem is."

"Did you out him?" I asked, though it probably sounded like an accusation.

He lifted his head up with an offended look. "No, I didn't. He came out on his own after I walked in on him. I wouldn't do that to him."

I sighed, sitting next to him on the bed. "I'm sorry, I'm just trying to figure it out."

"There's no figuring it out," Logan said sadly. "He's just different now."

That was the last we spoke of Vinny for the night.

Soon after the two of us were in a soundless sleep.

***

Waking up at Logan's house was always the same. He always kept his curtains and blinds open to wake up with the natural sunlight. I had done the same all summer at camp, but since that was over, I was hoping to sleep in a little later. However, everyone in this house were early risers so staying asleep would be difficult.

Logan was already up and dressed by the time I sat up to stretch and rub my eyes.

"What time is it?" I rasped, continuing to rub my eyes.

"Just before eight," Logan replied, typing away on his phone.

I groaned and threw myself back down on the bed. "Why can't you be a normal teenager and sleep until noon?"

Logan scoffed, looking toward me. "My parents would never let me sleep that late. They'd bang on my door until I got up."

Knowing his parents, I was sure that was true.

"My dad already has breakfast downstairs if you want to go grab some," Logan told me, nodding his head toward the door.

I nodded and got up from the bed, throwing on my clothes from the day before and following Logan down the stairs.

As we made our way into the kitchen, I bumped into none other than a shirtless Vinny Taylor. The coffee he was holding splashed out of his mug and onto his bare skin. Vinny let out a hiss in pain and sent me a deadly glare.

"Oh my God, Vinny. I'm so sorry," I apologized, looking to Logan for help. He just looked to his mom, Val, who put down everything she was doing to rush over to Vinny's aid.

"Vincent, honey, are you okay?" Val asked him, grabbing the mug out of his hand and placing it on the counter.

"I'm fine, Mom," Vinny uttered, sending me another glare before pushing past me to leave the kitchen.

A few moments later, Logan's dad, Jeff, entered the kitchen with a confused look on his face.

"What's up with Vinny?" he asked aloud to no one in particular.

"Coffee spill," Val answered while Logan said, "What *isn't* up with Vinny?"

Jeff glared at his son before looking down at the spilled coffee on the floor. Val grabbed a towel to begin cleaning the mess.

"Val, I'm sorry about the mess. Let me clean it up," I offered, holding out my hand for the towel.

Val waved me off and shook her head. "Don't worry about it sweetie."

"I'm going to go check up on Vinny. He seemed pretty pissed off," Jeff said, going to leave the kitchen before turning to address his family, "More pissed off than usual."

"Should I go apologize to him again?" I asked Logan who just shook his head.

"He's not gonna care," he told me.

"Vinny knows it was an accident," Val assured me.

Jeff bounded down the stairs and back into the kitchen just as Val finished cleaning the mess.

"Did he eat?" Jeff asked his wife.

She shook her head. "He was only in here for about two minutes and all he got was his coffee."

Jeff let out a loud sigh. crossing his arms. "He's telling me he already ate."

Val's face fell and the two began to speak in hushed tones while Logan stared blankly into his cup of coffee as he leaned against the counter. I took this as my chance to sneak out of the kitchen and up the stairs to Vinny's room.

The door was shut when I got there and I stood outside for a moment before deciding to knock. My knock was met with silence, sinai did it louder the next time. Still no answer.

Even though I knew it would piss him off, I opened the door and walked in uninvited. Vinny's head whipped around as soon as I walked in. He was sitting on his window sill, a lit cigarette between his fingers, and still shirtless with a red mark on his stomach and chest from the coffee burn.

"What do you want?" he rasped, turning his head toward the window to take a drag of his cigarette. "Wasn't burning me enough?"

"Hey, I'm sorry," I apologized again, walking further into the room and shutting the door behind me.

Vinny just shrugged, taking another drag.

I moved closer to him and sat down beside him at the window.

"So..." I started. "How was your summer?"

Vinny let out a short laugh, grinning at me with his cigarette between his teeth. The way he looked caused a pit in my stomach to grow.

"We're not going to do this, are we?" he sneered.

I let out a low sigh and muttered, "I guess not."

"You smoke?" he asked, pulling the cigarette from his lips.

"No," I told him, shaking my head. "My mom would kill me if she found out."

"So would mine," he replied with a wink. "So we can keep this between us, right?"

"Sure."

The Vinny I was looking at now was different than one I had known before. The one from the beginning of the summer had never smoked before and I doubted the thought had ever crossed his mind back then. Before, he was quiet yet well-liked with quite a few friends. This one was closed-off with a strange bitterness to his tone.

"Wanna go grab some breakfast?" I asked him as he finished his cigarette and stuck it in an ash tray.

"Already ate," he replied, getting up from the window sill.

I sent him a knowing look, but didn't say anything else. It wasn't like I could force him and he definitely wouldn't listen to me if I tried.

"Are you doing anything today? Maybe you could come hang–"

"What are you doing here, Carson?" Vinny cut me off. "You're Logan's friend, not mine. You don't even know me. Go back to him."

"Just wanted to see you since I've been gone all summer," I told him, standing up from my seat.

"Well, you saw me. Happy now?" he responded in a snarky tone.

"How's Marina and Spencer?" I asked him, changing the subject.

His expression darkened as he looked at me with hooded eyes. He just shrugged in response to my question.

"You don't know? Aren't they your best friends?"

"Get out," Vinny demanded, pointing toward the door.

I sighed after the two of us stared at each other for a few moments, and turned to leave the room. When I opened the door, Logan was standing there with his fist raised as if he was about to knock on the door. He held a plate of food in the other hand, presumably for Vinny.

Logan gave me a strange look but didn't say anything as he made his way into the room and placed the food down on Vinny's nightstand.

"Dad made you a plate," Logan told him, looking toward the window where the ash tray sat out in the open.

Vinny quickly moved to the ash tray and stashed it under his bed as if that would make Logan forget about it.

"I told him I already ate," Vinny said in a sharp tone.

"Well, we all know that's bullshit," Logan shot back. "Don't start this shit again, Vin. Seriously."

I couldn't help but feel like I was intruding on a private conversation. Vinny's glare at his brother was deadly and I could practically feel the heat from the steam coming out of his ears. I couldn't stay here any longer.

"You know what, Logan? I totally forgot I'm supposed to spend some time with my mom today," I told my friend, taking his attention away from Vinny.

Logan looked to me and his expression softened.

"Okay, you heading out now?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'll get going," I told him. "I'll see you guys later."

I waved to both Logan and Vinny before leaving Vinny's room to grab my things from Logan's. After I grabbed my things, I went downstairs to say goodbye to Jeff and Val and then I was on my way home.

**

Hello, welcome to my new book. I decided to post this because I'm having an awful time with online school and feel like I can't do anything for myself. I'm just constantly doing school work so I decided to post this so I can do SOMETHING I actually enjoy even though it's not really ready for me to post. I'm hoping since I posted it I'll have more motivation to get chapters done. I'll try to update weekly but I don't have a set day yet so stay tuned.

Let me know what you think of the chapter! I miss reading your thoughts.

How do you feel about Carson and Vinny? And the other characters you've met so far? Any predictions about the story?

02

TRIGGER WARNING: brief mention of suicide

Carson Hughes

I walked into the first day of school on Monday with hints of dread and excitement. Dread because the summer was finally over and I was going to be stuck in class all day, but excitement due to the fact it was my last year.

I met up with my friends in our usual spot near the cafeteria where I was the last to arrive.

"About time you got here," Hadley greeted me as I sat down beside her.

"Sorry, I was just putting off getting to school for as long as possible," I replied with a slight smile.

"Why aren't you excited?" Dana questioned from beside Logan. "It's senior year! It's time to make memories!"

Logan smiled at his girlfriend and pecked her on the cheek.

"I'm with Carson on this one," Archie agreed. "I can't wait to get out of here."

"I don't know. Aren't you guys going to miss it?" Isaac asked.

"No," Archie, Logan, and I chorused.

Isaac waved us off, shaking his head.

Soon after the bell rang and I had to head to my first class of the day, English. I knew this was a class I was going to dread. Luckily, I had this class with Isaac and he sat to my right.

About ten minutes after class started, the door opened and in walked a disheveled looking Vinny Taylor wearing a black sweatshirt with the hood up.

"Vincent Taylor, why are you walking into my class ten minutes late?" Mr. Thompson asked, sitting on his desk as Vinny looked around for the only empty seat which just so happened to be to my left.

"I got lost," Vinny replied with a cough, sitting down beside me.

"Sure you did," Mr. Thompson said with an eye roll. "Don't make a habit of it. Next time you'll need a pass."

"Got it."

I watched Vinny out of the corner of my eye as he leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. It took me a second to notice the stares he was getting from the students around him. Maybe they were shocked by this new Vinny, the one that shows up late to class even though he never used to. Or, he was attracting attention for something different entirely.

"Let me guess," I whispered to Vinny, leaning closer to him, "you were having a smoke?"

"Maybe you do know me better than I thought," Vinny replied with a grin.

"I can smell it," I told him with a warning look. All it would take would be the wrong person getting a whiff and he would be in big trouble.

"You got some cologne?"

I shook my head then looked over to Isaac who was watching us with an incredulous stare.

"You have some cologne Vinny can borrow?" I asked Isaac. He looked over to Vinny briefly then back to me and shook his head before turning his stare to the front of the room.

I turned to Vinny and shrugged.

"I'm not worried about it," Vinny said casually.

Class droned on, so I was relieved when the bell finally rang to set us free. I looked over to Vinny to see that he looked like he was sleeping. I rolled my eyes and gently kicked his chair to wake him up. His head shot up in surprise and he looked around the room to take in his surroundings. Once he noticed where he was and that everyone was leaving, he nodded at me before standing up and leaving the room.

"Gonna be interesting with Vinny in that class," I joked to Isaac as the two of us stepped out into the hall.

Isaac shrugged. "I guess. I just feel weird sitting with him, with the way he's been acting with Logan. You know?"

I gave my friend a strange look. "No, not really."

"He barely talks to him, yet we're going to be class buddies with him?" Isaac explained, shaking his head. "I don't know. It's just weird."

I ignored Isaac's comment and went onto my next class. The morning dragged on until the period before lunch when I had gym class.

I walked into the locker room and was immediately greeted by a topless Logan. Before I could say anything to my friend, Vinny walked in behind me, bumping my shoulder as he walked over to an empty locker.

The locker room became silent at the sight of Vinny. Stares found their way to him as he set his things down and took out his gym clothes.

Seth Powers, quarterback of the football team, sent Vinny a disgusted look before making his way over to him.

Logan instantly went over to step between them.

"Leave him alone," Logan warned.

Vinny sighed and turned to look at the two of them.

"If he wants to hit me, let him," Vinny said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'll even let you have one free hit before I fight back."

Logan sighed, placing his hand on his forehead in annoyance. "No."

"I was just gonna tell the fairy that he better not look at me while I'm changing or he *will* get hit," Seth warned, his friends behind him nodding in agreement.

"If I looked at you naked my eyes would burn and fall out of my head. You're not my type," Vinny replied in a snarky tone.

I could practically feel Logan's annoyance with his brother from here as Seth seethed in front of him. Logan stood in front of Vinny with a tense, rigid stance, seemingly hoping to keep him from getting into it with Seth. Logan would do anything for his brother, but he wasn't going to be happy if he had to take a punch for him because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Just make sure he keeps his eyes off of me and his mouth shut," Seth hissed before turning away and walking back over to his friends.

Logan turned around and grabbed Vinny by the shoulders, steering him over toward me.

"You need to keep your big mouth shut," Logan hissed quietly to Vinny, stopping in front of the lockers where I stood.

Vinny turned and gave his brother a look of irritation, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I don't need you to save me," he shot back.

Logan's expression was one of frustration as Vinny turned away from him to finish getting ready for class. I motioned my hand downward, silently telling Logan to calm down. He let out a sigh and nodded, moving to stand in front of the locker he chose and began to change.

By the time we all got out to the gym, Vinny made sure to stand on the other side of the group that was huddled around, waiting for the gym

teacher to start taking attendance. By the time Coach Bronson got to Vinny, he narrowed his eyes and pointed his pen at him.

"Vinny Taylor, why are you not running cross country this year?" Coach Bronson questioned in a pointed tone, all eyes going to Vinny.

Vinny didn't say anything as he stared back at Coach with an impassive expression. There was an awkward silence in the air for a few moments before Coach Bronson shook his head.

"See me after class, Vinny," he said, then continued taking attendance.

Once he was done making sure everyone was there, he sent us outside to the track to run laps. Vinny was the first one out and I couldn't keep my eyes off of him as he began running. He had been on the cross country team since seventh grade, putting up great numbers and even set a few records for the school.

"Why isn't Vinny doing cross country?" I asked Logan with a curious expression as the two of us jogged next to each other.

Logan shrugged, turning his head to see that Vinny was about to lap us.

"Said he didn't want to when my dad asked about it," Logan told me in a quiet tone as his brother ran by us. "Dad was pretty mad about it."

"Why?"

Logan shrugged again. "I don't know. I guess he just wanted him to continue doing something that he loves and is good at?"

I nodded in understanding as I watched Vinny's figure become smaller and smaller as he got further away, wondering what had happened to change him so drastically.

***

My mother was already home by the time I got home from school. She must have gotten out early because she usually didn't get home until a few hours

later.

"How was school?" she asked me when I walked in the door.

"It was alright, nothing special," I replied, setting my backpack down on the floor before sitting beside my mother on the couch. "Did you get out early?"

"Yeah, I wanted to see you after your first day," she told me with a smile.

I laughed and leaned back in my seat.

"It wasn't all that exciting," I admitted.

"But it was your last first day *ever* ," she enthusiastically responded, patting my shoulder.

"Until college," I reminded her.

"Not the same thing," she denied with a chuckle.

It was pretty much the same thing.

I was thrilled to be able to spend some time with my mom after being gone all summer. It was just the two of us since my lowlife father bailed on us. The summer apart was hard on both of us, and I was glad to be back.

Eventually, I decided to go over to Logan's like I normally did. Mom had to catch up on some sleep since she had to be at work early the next morning.

As I absentmindedly drove down the road to Logan's house, something in the road caught my attention. My eyes squinted, trying to figure out what it was. Once I realized, I slammed on the brakes, causing my tires to loudly screech.

Vinny Taylor was lying in the middle of the street with his arms and legs sprawled out. Without even thinking, I put the car in park and jumped out, sprinting over to Vinny.

"Vinny!" I shouted as I knelt down beside him. "Are you okay?"

The sheer panic I felt at the thought of him being injured slight subsided when he opened his eyes to give me a narrow gaze.

"I'm fine," he said in a calm tone.

I let out a breath that I didn't realize I was holding and roughly tossed my hand through my hair.

"What the hell are you doing then?" I shouted at him.

"Thinking," was his vague reply.

I let out a scoff and stood up, looking down at him.

"You couldn't do that somewhere you won't get killed?" I asked him incredulously.

My heart was hammering in my chest just thinking about someone not seeing him before it was too late.

Vinny sat up and shook his head at me.

"This is a dead end road. No one comes down here," he replied with an eye roll as he stood up.

"I did," I nearly shouted, my frustration growing. "Are you looking to get run over?"

Vinny just rolled his eyes at me again and turned to walk toward his home.

"Quit rolling your eyes at me!" I shouted after him before going back to my car to pull up to the curb.

After parking the car and shutting it off, I made my way into the house, not even bothering to knock. I instantly went down to the basement where Logan, Dana, and Isaac were already waiting for me.

"What's got you looking all stressed out?" Dana asked when I sat down beside her.

"Vinny," I instantly replied.

"What?" Logan questioned, whipping his head to look at me.

"He was just lying in the middle of the street," I told him, my voice shaking. "I almost ran him over. I'm freaked out."

Logan sighed, shaking his head and rubbing his eyes while Dana rubbed his back.

"Yeah, he does that," Logan muttered.

" *He does that?* " I echoed in a low tone. "And you've never thought to get him to stop?"

Logan looked up and glared at me. "I get him to stop when I catch him doing it. I can't watch him twenty-four-seven."

I gave him an apologetic look before Logan let out another sigh and stood up.

"I'm going to go talk to him," he said before leaving the basement.

"Have they ever thought about making Vinny talk to a therapist or something?" I asked once Logan was out of earshot.

Dana shrugged. "They don't really talk about it."

Isaac nodded along in agreement. "Every time he does something, Logan will talk to him and his parents will talk to him. I think they think he's just going to stop eventually."

"Does he do stuff like this all the time?" I wondered.

"Kinda. I don't really know," Isaac replied, leaning back in his seat. "Logan doesn't really like to talk about it."

I looked to Dana, knowing Logan would have told her. She kept her face impassive, not willing to spill any of her boyfriend's secrets. There were

three people in the world that Logan would tell everything to. It was Dana, me, and Vinny. Since I was gone all summer and Vinny flew off the handle, Dana was undoubtedly the only one Logan told everything to.

"Vinny get back here!" I heard Logan's voice yell before two pairs of feet bounded down the steps to the basement.

Once he was down the stairs, Vinny made his way right over to me. He stood in front of where I sat, pointing his finger at me.

"You don't need to be telling my brother on me," Vinny scolded in a stern tone. His face looked challenging as if he was waiting for me to stand up and argue with him.

Before I could say anything, Logan grabbed his brother by the shoulder and turned him so that they were facing each other.

"Don't go blaming Carson!" Logan exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. "He was just concerned!"

"Well then *he* can stop," Vinny replied, crossing his arms over his chest.

Logan let out a deep breath and grabbed Vinny by the arm, dragging him to the corner of the room. The two spoke in hushed tones, but I heard every word of it.

"Look, if you want to die or something you need to tell me," Logan whispered.

Vinny scoffed. "Fuck off."

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" Logan asked, his voice slightly wavering.

I held my breath as Vinny didn't respond for a moment.

"Leave me alone," was what he finally said.

"Vinny, *please* ," Logan's voice cracked with emotion.

With that, Vinny turned on his heel and stomped back up the stairs. Logan stared at the steps for a few moments until we heard Vinny's door slam shut upstairs. Then Logan clenched his jaw and made his way back over to the couch.

"Everything okay?" I asked him softly.

"I don't know," he sighed. "I really just don't know."

We sat in silence for a few moments, none of us knowing what to say. It was hard for me to act like I hadn't hear Logan's conversation with his brother, but I didn't want to bring it up since it was meant to be private between the two of them and I wasn't sure if Isaac or Dana had heard it.

Dana wrapped her arms around her boyfriend, soothingly rubbing his back and whispering into his ear.

I hated seeing Logan look so upset. He was always so happy and pleasant, but this thing with Vinny was really taking a toll on him.

I couldn't help but think something more had to have happened this summer than anyone was letting on.

**

Here is chapter 2. Thanks for all the love on chapter 1<3 Just thought I'd publish this to get us going a little bit. I don't like leaving books up with only one chapter for too long.

Please let me know what you think. What'd you think about the scenes in class and in the locker room? What about the after school scenes?

Also casting. I have started thinking about casting but I can't find anyone who I picture as Vinny but I'll try to get character aesthetics out soon.

Thanks for reading.

03

Carson Hughes

The air was hot as I made my way to school the next day. This was the worst part of the year, while it was still technically summer but for some reason we had to be in school. The hallway was was crowded with girls fanning themselves at the disgusting heat and guys leaning against the lockers.

As I made my way to my locker, a familiar girl caught my eye. Standing against a locker and fanning her face with her hand as she talked to another girl, was Marina. Marina, one of Vinny's best friends. Or, former best friend.

"Hey Marina," I kindly greeted her with a wave as her friend walked off.

"What's up," she said back, nodding her head at me.

"How was your summer?" I asked as I stopped in front of her.

Marina shrugged with a small smile. "Nothing too exciting, you?"

"Just worked," I replied.

I was dying to ask her about Vinny, but I doubted she would be willing to open up to me about that. Just as the thought crossed my mind, Vinny walked by and caught Marina's eye. Her and I watched as he made his way down the hallway, getting shoved by Seth Powers as he walked by.

"Hey Seth," I called out as he got closer. He was laughing with his group of friends before he turned to me with a confused look.

"What?" he snapped.

"Lay off Vinny," I told him.

The last thing Logan needed was to have to worry about his brother getting picked on at school. If I could do anything to ease that stress for my friend, I would.

Seth just rolled his eyes before shaking his head and walking away from me.

"I didn't know Seth had a problem with him," Marina said in a low voice, watching Seth as he walked down the hall.

"He was giving him trouble in the locker room yesterday," I admitted. "I don't know what the issue is."

Marina let out a long sigh before slamming her locker door shut. "See you later, Carson."

After departing from Marina, I got my things from my locker and made my way to where my friends would be hanging out.

"Showing up last again," Hadley pointed out as I sat down beside her.

"I was talking to Marina," I said in response.

"Anyway," Archie interrupted, stealing the attention for himself. "We were talking about starting up movie night again."

I nodded. "Sounds fun. We can do it my place if you want."

"Mine or yours. Doesn't matter," Logan added. "But my parents will be gone Friday night."

"So yours it is?" Isaac said in a light tone.

"It'll be just like old times!" Dana excitedly cheered. "Hads and I will go get snacks after school on Friday."

Soon after, the warning bell rang and I headed off to English class with Isaac beside me. Surprisingly, Vinny was already in his seat by the time we

arrived. He leaned back in his chair so that the front legs were lifted off the ground as he read a book that he held in his left hand.

"What are you reading?" I asked as I sat down in my seat beside him. It was hard to ignore the look of discomfort on Isaac's face when he saw me speaking to Vinny.

I leaned forward to take a glimpse a the cover of the book he was reading. *Beloved.*

"Sounds cheesy," I told him with a grin to which Vinny scoffed.

"It's definitely not what you think it's about, I can promise you that," he replied, turning the page.

"It's not some romance novel we're going to be forced to read?"

Vinny let out a small laugh that I could barely even register before shaking his head and closing the book, looking over at me.

"No, it's not," he told me, his lips slightly quirked upwards.

"Why are you already reading it anyway?" I asked with a puzzled expression. "It hasn't even been assigned yet."

Vinny shrugged, leaning forward so that all the legs of his chair were safely on the floor.

"I like to get ahead," he said. "You think I have time to go grab a smoke before class?"

I checked the time and immediately shook my head.

"Definitely not."

Just as the words left my mouth, Mr. Thompson walked in the room with a coffee in hand.

"Glad to see you're on time today, Vincent," Mr. Thompson greeted Vinny to which he just rolled his eyes.

When the late bell rang, Mr. Thompson immediately began class by discussing *Beloved* .

***

Of course, by the time gym rolled around, we were being forced onto teams for a floor hockey game. Coach Bronson made Seth Powers and Vinny each captains, much to Vinny's dismay. To give him credit, he did try to get out of it, but Coach Bronson was not having any of Vinny's negative attitude and forced the captaincy on him.

"I don't think it's very fair that you made two guys captains when there are plenty of girls in this class," Vinny pointed out. "Don't you think that's a little sexist? Not putting any girl in a captain position?"

Coach Bronson sent Vinny a look of annoyance while most of the class watched in amusement. Logan, on the other hand, gave his brother an irritated scowl, as did Seth.

"Fine, Vinny you're right," Coach relented with a sigh. "Madison can take Seth's spot."

"That is *not—"* Vinny tried to argue, but Coach Bronson put his hand up to silence him.

"Stop arguing with me," Coach demanded. "Nothing you say now will change my mind."

I didn't miss the nasty glare that was sent Vinny's way by Seth and by that look, I knew he would be targeting him during the game. That was probably his plan all along.

Madison started off by picking one of her friends and when it was Vinny's turn, he just pointed at someone with a bored look on his face.

It went on like that for the next few minutes, Vinny eventually pointing toward me while Logan and Seth were picked for Madison's team.

"Captains choose your goalies!" Coach Bronson shouted you each team that occupied either side of the gym.

"I'll be goalie," one girl on our team stated before anyone else could say anything.

"Whatever," Vinny replied in a bored tone.

We all grabbed our sticks, which were blue for our team color, and I looked to Vinny who stood off to the side. His eyes were cast downward at the floor as he leaned on the hockey stick, placing most of his weight on his left leg and bending his right knee.

I stopped staring at him before he could catch me.

Coach Bronson ordered Vinny and Madison to the center of the gym floor for the face off. Vinny lost it and Madison batted the ball toward Seth who immediately started running down the floor toward our goal.

Vinny stepped out of his way and moved toward the goal while the rest of our team chased after him. When Seth got to the goal and stood in front of Vinny to take a shot, Vinny moved out of his way again and Seth got the ball in the net.

"Vinny!" our goalie complained, but he paid her no mind as he walked away back to the center of the gym.

The next play was better. Vinny actually won the face off and ran with the ball for a few moments before passing it off to me. Part of me wished he had just kept it. He was the fastest person on either team. No one would have been able to keep up with him.

I passed it to one of the girls on our team when I couldn't get a clear shot and she tried shooting toward the goal but it bounced back to Vinny. Seth

went toward him and Vinny passed to one of our teammates. A split second later, Seth barreled into him, knocking Vinny on the floor.

Coach Bronson blew his whistle and made his way over to the two boys.

"Sorry Vinny, I couldn't slow down in time," Seth said in the most insincere tone I had ever heard, holding his hand out for him to take.

Vinny stared at his outstretched hand for a moment with a blank expression before standing up on his own.

"Slow down, Seth. It's just gym class not the Olympics," Coach Bronson said in a warning tone.

"Will do, Coach."

Vinny dusted himself off and picked up his stick as Coach Bronson said something to him, too quiet for me to hear.

"You did that on purpose," I heard Logan say to Seth, a hard glare present on his face.

Seth just rolled his eyes. "No, I didn't."

Still sounding ever so insincere.

***

After school, I headed over to Logan's house like I always did whenever my mother had a night shift. There was no use in going home all by myself and the Taylors always welcomed me into their home.

Logan and Vinny were the only two home by the time I got there, so I just let myself in.

"Logan?" I called out, walking further into the house.

I went into the kitchen in search for my friend, but something else caught my eye. Vinny was running around the back yard with the family dog,

looking like he was having the time of his life. I couldn't help but crack a smile.

I walked out onto the back porch, gaining the attention of both Vinny and Luna, the black lab.

"Logan's in the basement," Vinny called out when he saw me.

I nodded and made my way out into the yard to pet Luna.

"You two seem to be having fun," I pointed out with a laugh.

"I'm just trying to get her to burn some of her energy," he said, looking slightly embarrassed. "She almost fuckin' knocked me over when I got home today."

Luna moved away from me to sit by Vinny and nudge him with her nose.

Vinny rolled his eyes. "She could chase me around for hours."

"Go ahead, don't let me stop you," I said, motioning for him to continue.

He gave me an apprehensive look for a few moments before he took off, Luna chasing him. Vinny really was the only one who could do this with the dog because he was the only one fast enough to keep up with her.

He let out a loud laugh as Luna caught up to him and nipped at his pant legs to try to slow him down. Vinny turned quickly and started running back toward me with a wide smile. I didn't think I had ever seen him look so carefree.

"Carson!" I heard Logan's voice call out.

I turned to see him standing in the doorway, motioning for me to go inside. I gave one last look to Vinny and Luna before making my way over to Logan.

"What were you doing?" Logan asked as the two of us went into the living room.

"Just seeing what they were doing," I told him in a casual tone.

"Luna was really hyper today," Logan said, turning on the TV.

"Yeah, Vinny said that," I replied.

"I'm just glad he plays with her. It keeps them both happy," Logan said with a slight grin.

"Did he say anything about what happened in gym?" I asked.

Logan shook his head. "I didn't try to talk to him about it."

"Seth needs to stop," I said with a stern look.

"I know but it's not like I can fight Vinny's battles for him," Logan pointed out. "Besides, he'd beat the shit out of me."

We were silent for a few moments before Logan started again.

"I don't even know what his problem is with him. Is he really that threatened by him being gay?"

"He's a narcissist that thinks just because Vinny's gay, he's attracted to him," I replied.

"Stop talking about me," Vinny said when he suddenly appeared behind us, Luna following him closely.

Logan just rolled his eyes at him.

"Are you going to do anything about Seth?" I asked, turning to face him.

Vinny shrugged, taking a long sip of water. He didn't say anything before turning around and heading up the stairs to his room, Luna going to the corner of the living room to curl up in her bed.

"He's going up there to smoke out his window," Logan muttered with his eyes narrowed. "I don't know when he picked up that disgusting habit."

I didn't say anything.

The two of us only made small talk as we watched TV until Jeff walked through the front door.

"Hey guys," he greeted us, taking a seat next to me on the couch.

"Hey Dad," Logan replied.

"What do you guys want for dinner? Chicken or steak?"

"Chicken," Logan and I answered at the same time.

Jeff stood up from the couch. "You got it. Better get on that before your Mom gets home."

It didn't take long for dinner to be prepared and for Val to come waltzing in the front door with a smile on her face.

"Good day?" Logan asked her.

"Just happy to be home!" she said before going into the kitchen with her husband.

We were soon called into the dining room and all of us sat at the table, minus Vinny. Jeff had called him down a few minutes earlier but never got an answer.

Jeff sighed and made his way back to the bottom of the stairs.

"Vincent!" Jeff yelled up the stairs. "Come down here or I will physically drag you down here!"

That occurrence must have happened before because that was all it took for Vinny's door to open and slam shut before he trudged down the stairs and into the kitchen followed by Jeff. Vinny didn't say anything as he sat down beside Val and across from me. Val placed her hand on his shoulder, leaning over to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"We're planning on having a movie night on Friday," Logan told his parents. "Just us and the rest of the group."

"That's fine," Jeff replied, taking a bite of his dinner.

"Just no wild parties while we're out," Val said in a joking tone.

Logan just shook his head at her.

Conversation continued between us except for Vinny. He stared down at his plate, only taking small bites of food every so often. He hadn't put much on his plate to begin with.

"Can I be excused?" Vinny suddenly asked.

Jeff shook his head. "You barely ate."

Vinny sighed, leaning back in his seat with a bored expression.

"Vincent," Jeff said in a warning tone. "You know the deal. Finish most of your plate and you can go."

Val sent an encouraging smile toward her son while he groaned and took another bite of his food.

But as soon as Jeff gave him the go ahead, he was gone.

**

Hello. Thanks for reading!

What did you think about the chapter? About meeting Marina? Gym class? After school at the Taylor's house?

Still not sure when update days are going to be so for now it's just sporadic.

Thanks!

04

Carson Hughes

It had been a while since we did our movie night. The last time we had all been together to do it was well before summer, so it was nice to be able to pick it back up.

"Dana wants to know what you want for drinks," Logan said as we sat together on the couch, looking down at his phone.

"She doesn't need to get me anything," I answered.

He waved me off. "Don't worry about it, I'm paying her back half."

"I'll just stick with what you have here," I told him.

"Whatever, man," Logan replied. "Archie's with her anyway. He'll probably get something you like."

A moment later, Isaac walked into the room with his backpack slung over his shoulder. He tossed it down on the floor before taking a seat on the recliner.

"Do we know what we're watching?" Isaac asked.

Logan shrugged. "Dana and Hadley are picking."

"So it's either going to be something terrifying or super romantic?"

"Pretty much."

Dana and Hadley had an odd taste in movies, but we always knew when they picked it would end up being something interesting.

"We have arrived," Archie announced as he walked into the house ahead of Dana and Hadley, all of them carrying grocery bags.

Archie tossed me a box of Sour Patch Kids and placed a bottle of orange soda in my lap before sitting on the love-seat, followed by Hadley.

"Let's start this thing!" Archie exclaimed, settling into his seat.

"Wait for me, I'm going to grab a blanket," Dana said, scurrying toward the stairs, presumably to get a blanket from Logan's room.

"Dude, Isaac, that hot girl from chemistry class works at the grocery store," Archie said with a smirk on his face.

"Tori?" he asked.

"Is that her name?"

Hadley smacked his arm while Logan and I shared a look, rolling our eyes.

Isaac scoffed. "Yeah, that's her name and you would know that if you talked to her instead of just staring at her tits."

"What's the fun in that?" Archie joked, looking to Hadley as if trying to get a reaction out of her.

" *Arch* ," Hadley whined, scowling at him. "Stop talking about girls like that, seriously."

He put up his hands in mock surrender as Dana came down the steps with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

Just as Dana was about to start the movie, Vinny came bounding down the stairs, causing all of us to turn our attention toward him.

"Hey," Dana called out, gaining his attention.

"Hm?" Vinny hummed, looking bored.

"Come watch a movie with us," she said in a friendly, yet commanding tone.

"Dana–" Logan started, but she put her hand up to stop him.

Vinny looked slightly amused at Logan and shook his head.

"No thanks," Vinny said, turning around to walk into the kitchen.

Dana looked to her boyfriend with a mean glare.

"What?" Logan asked her.

"You made him uncomfortable!" Dana snapped, her eyes narrowed as she stood up from the couch.

Logan rolled his eyes. "He would've said no anyway."

"Because he wants to isolate himself and he feels like you've given up on him," Dana replied, placing her hands on her hips.

I couldn't help but agree with Dana. It was obvious Vinny was going through something and it seemed like his family was just leaving him to deal with it on his own.

"Dana, come on," Logan pleaded.

Dana walked away from the couch and followed Vinny's trail into the kitchen.

"She's being ridiculous," Logan mumbled, looking to me to agree with him.

I just shrugged, not saying anything.

"What? You agree with her?" he asked me.

I sighed, sharing a look with him. "I don't know, Logan."

A few moments later, Dana came back into the living room with Vinny and Luna following behind her. The rest of us sent surprised expressions their way as Dana sat down on the couch, Vinny sitting between her and I with Luna in front of him.

"I have a feeling we will all like this one," Dana commented with a smirk on her face as she pressed play.

When the creepy music started playing, we all knew it was some horror movie that Dana and Hadley had decided on. The two of them always enjoyed scaring the rest of us.

"Dana," Logan whined, sending a glare toward his girlfriend.

She just grinned toward the TV as the terrifying opening scene played on the screen.

As the movie progressed, I noticed Vinny tense up beside me during the suspense. I was too busy looking at him to be scared by the jump scare that caused him to jerk back and cover his face with his hands.

"Do you want to come under the blanket?" Dana whispered to him.

Vinny just shook his head but at the next scare, he grabbed the blanket sitting on Dana's lap and covered his face, letting out a slightly distressed sound. I nearly laughed out loud at the sight of Logan, Dana, and Vinny all huddled under the same blanket, holding it up so that it was just under their eyes.

Just as another scare popped up on screen, Vinny's arm shot out toward me and his hand tightly gripped my forearm. He let go as soon as he realized what he did. I tried not to let that action distract me for the rest of the movie.

Vinny and Dana stayed hidden under the blanket for the remainder of the film, their eyes peeking out at the top. I couldn't understand why Dana did this to herself. She was the one that picked out the movie, yet she seemed terrified by it.

I hadn't watched much of it. I was too busy thinking about how Vinny grabbed my arm and how that made me feel things that I couldn't even explain.

"I liked it!" Hadley announced with a grin once the movie ended.

"You would," Archie said with a huff, crossing his arms over his chest. "The rest of us won't be able to sleep tonight."

Hadley rolled her eyes. "Don't be a baby."

"What are we watching next?" I asked, gaining Hadley's attention.

"We have something else picked out," Dana assured me, pulling the blankets off of her and Vinny so she could stand.

Vinny stood up after her and looked as if he was going to leave the room.

"You don't want to watch another with us?" I asked him.

He turned and looked at me briefly.

"No thanks. I'm traumatized enough for the night," he said, turning on his heel to head up to his room, Luna following after him.

The group waited for Vinny to leave the room before they started talking again.

"Why did you invite him to watch with us?" Hadley asked Dana with a curious expression, no judgement in her tone.

Dana shrugged. "I just feel bad. He's always alone in his room."

"Well, he did push all his friends away just because he came out," Archie commented, earning a glare from the rest of us.

"Enough, Arch," Logan said in a low tone.

"What? There's nothing wrong with him being gay," Archie continued. "But it's a weird reason to cut everyone off."

"I said enough," Logan snapped harshly, effectively shutting Archie up.

I couldn't help but think of my own predicament. None of my friends knew I was gay and I was sure if I came out, I wouldn't want to lose them. Coming out would be enough stress, I would need my friends to help me get through it.

But, I wasn't entirely sure I ever wanted them to know. I had no idea how they would react, even though they seemed to be okay with it. I was worried it would be different because it was *me* , that they would think I had been hiding a huge part of myself from them for years. And I was. I had been hiding.

"What the hell is this?" Archie asked, capturing my attention. I looked toward the TV to see that Dana had put in another movie, this one looking drastically different from the last.

"It's a rom-com," Dana answered. "Horror and rom-com, the best genres."

"She's right," Hadley agreed with a nod. "And they go great together."

"I fail to see how they go great together," Isaac said with a laugh.

"Just hush," Dana said, reclaiming her seat on the couch. "Hadley and I have the superior taste in movies, we all know this."

"Is that why you were shitting your pants during the last one?" Archie asked in a snarky tone, earning a laugh from Logan.

Dana glared at her boyfriend and that shut him up quick.

"Whipped," Archie said under a fake cough, causing Logan to launch one of the couch pillows at him.

"Enough, watch the movie," Dana scolded, tucking herself under the blanket.

I situated myself to get more comfortable, leaning my head on the armrest of the couch. I hadn't even gotten through the first ten minutes of the movie before I was asleep.

***

The TV was still on when I woke up in the middle of the night. Logan and Dana were curled up together on one side of the couch while I was squished on the other side. I had woken up to the sound of Isaac coming up off the chair as he headed to the bathroom. That made me realize I had to go as well.

Not wanting to wait for Isaac to finish, I stood up from the couch and made my way to the stairs so I could use the upstairs bathroom.

The hall upstairs was dark and I had trouble finding my way through. I took a few more steps and placed my hand on the wall, trying to find a light switch. A second later, I bumped into someone and nearly fell on the floor. It had scared me so bad I was surprised I hadn't pissed my pants.

Suddenly, the light turned on in the hall and I was met with a very startled looking Vinny. He was breathing deeply with his eyes wide and his hands in fists.

"Holy fuck, Carson," he cursed, shaking his head at me. "You scared the fuck out of me!"

"Sorry," I said in a quiet tone. "I just needed the bathroom. Isaac is in the one downstairs."

Vinny's hands were still in fists as we spoke.

"Are you okay?" I asked him as I realized his breathing hadn't slowed.

"I'm fine," he snapped, shaking slightly. "You just scared the living fuck out of me. Why didn't you turn on the damn light?"

"I couldn't find it," I sheepishly admitted, a smile of innocence creeping onto my face.

Vinny muttered something under his breath, pushing past me to go back to his room. I went to the bathroom and did my business before I found myself outside Vinny's door, holding up a fist to knock on the door.

Once I knocked, there was no response, not that I expected there to be. Vinny's light was on, so I knew that he was awake and I knocked again. Still no response.

I prepared myself to be punched in the face as I opened the door a crack and looked inside. Vinny was scowling at me from his window where he was smoking a cigarette.

"There was a reason I didn't answer you," he said, taking a drag from the cigarette and blowing out a long stream of smoke.

"Can I come in?"

"You're so annoying."

I took that as a yes.

I walked into the room, shutting the door behind, and took a seat on Vinny's bed, facing him. He seemed to look everywhere but me, bouncing his leg lightly on the window sill where he sat. His hands were shaking slightly and I could only assume that what had happened in the hallway had genuinely scared him.

"I'm sorry I scared you," I said, breaking the silence.

Vinny gave me a strange look as he took another drag.

"It doesn't matter," he said, smoke leaving his lips.

"You can come sleep downstairs with us if you want," I offered softly, tilting my head to glance at the side of his face. "You know, if you're scared."

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not five."

I laughed. "I know, but I'd be kinda scared to sleep alone after that."

He shrugged, bringing the cigarette to his lips. "Well, I'm not sleeping."

"It's cramped down there anyway," I said, leaning back on my hands. "I was sharing the couch with Logan and Dana." My knees ached from having being bent for so long.

"You can sleep in Logan's room," Vinny said, flicking his cigarette in the ash tray.

"You're not going to offer me one?" I joked, nodding toward the cigarette.

"No," he replied, sticking it between his lips. "It's a nasty habit apparently. Wouldn't want to ruin you."

"You should quit," I told him in a serious tone.

"If I wasn't so hellbent on being self destructive maybe I would," he replied, his lips curling up ever so slightly.

I didn't know if he meant to be funny, but I laughed anyway. Vinny took one last drag before sticking the cigarette in the ash tray and standing up to shut the window. He tore his shirt off and threw it in the nearby hamper before looking at me with raised eyebrows.

"What?" I asked, trying to keep my eyes off his chest.

"Leave," he said, gesturing toward the door. "I'm going to sleep."

"You just said you weren't sleeping," I countered, raising my eyebrows.

"I wasn't at that moment," he argued, narrowing his eyes at me. "But now I would like to, so leave."

I sighed, standing up from his bed. He stood in front of me with his arms crossed over his chest and an impatient look on his face. I took this moment to take a good look at him, admiring just how good looking Vinny Taylor was.

It was always a joke before he came out with Hadley and Dana that they were both attracted to him. He wasn't conventionally attractive, and that was probably what pulled people in. He was hot without looking like your stereotypical hot guy. His quiet, moody aura only made him more alluring.

"Are you going to stare at me or are you going to get out?" he snapped, pulling me from my thoughts.

I sighed again. "I'll go."

"Good."

I chuckled. "Goodnight Vinny."

"Turn my light off on your way out," he said, getting into bed as I started walking toward the door.

"Okay."

"And shut the door."

"I will."

I did as he asked before leaving the room and making my way toward the stairs. I shut the hall light off before going back to the living room.

When I got there, Dana and Logan had sprawled out even further, taking up the entire couch. I groaned, picking up a couch pillow and pulling one of the blankets down to sleep on the floor.

"Where were you?" Isaac's voice caught me off guard, startling me.

"The upstairs bathroom," I told him in a whisper, situating myself on the floor. "You were in the one down here."

"You were up there for a while," Isaac pointed out.

"I didn't know you were timing me."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "You were in Vinny's room."

"So what?"

Isaac shrugged.

"Why does it matter?" I asked him, raising my eyebrows in question.

"I guess it doesn't," he answered.

"So why bring it up?"

"Forget it," Isaac muttered, turning away from me to go back to sleep.

Isaac's questions sounded strangely accusatory and that scared me. There was no reason for me to believe that he thought anything was going on with Vinny and me, but I was still paranoid about it. I didn't want him to be making any assumptions about my sexuality. The thought frightened me, even though there was nothing with me and Vinny.

I wasn't ready to come out, but it seemed like Isaac was already on his way to figuring me out.

**

Hey everyone. Thanks for reading.

What did you think about movie night and Vinny joining the group? What about Carson scaring him and going up to his room afterwards? And his conversation with Isaac? What do you think it up with Isaac?

Let me know!

05

Carson Hughes

I woke up on the uncomfortable floor the next morning, lifting my head up to see Logan sitting on the couch and scrolling through his phone. Everyone else was still asleep as I rolled over on my side to check my phone for the time. It was only seven and I didn't know why I was wide awake. Probably because I was stuck on their awful hardwood floor.

I groaned aloud and sat up, rubbing my tired eyes with the back of my hand and gaining Logan's attention.

"You good?" he asked, setting his phone down on the arm of the couch.

"It's too early," I complained, resting my hands on the floor behind me to hold myself up. "And your floor sucks."

"You didn't have to sleep on the floor," he said in a dull tone.

"You would rather me cuddle up with you and Dana?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

Logan chuckled, his mouth quirking upward slightly. "We wouldn't mind."

I rolled my eyes. The last thing I needed was to third wheel on a relationship. I wasn't that desperate. Yet.

"What? You don't want to be part of this?" Logan asked with a laugh, motioning down toward Dana who was sleeping with her mouth wide open. Every time she breathed out, the hair in front of her face flew upward.

I let out a snort. "No thank you."

"You never did tell me if you hooked up with anyone over the summer," Logan pointed out with a smirk after a few moments of silence. "Any hot

camp counselors?"

I immediately shifted my eyes downward toward the floor, not wanting to meet his gaze. Part of me wanted to tell Logan how I had hooked up with another counselor all summer long, but then he would ask questions. And I didn't want to tell him I had been hooking up with a guy.

"I mean..."

"You did!" Logan nearly shouted, an excited grin on his face as he slightly moved forward toward me.

"Shut up," I muttered, keeping my eyes cast down.

"Tell me!" he urged, leaning forward again. "Tell me about it! Who was it? How many?"

I groaned, shifting my eyes toward the ceiling. "Logan stop."

"Was it more than one?" he asked. "Oh my God, Carson. You have to tell me."

"It was just one," I mumbled.

"How many times?"

"Logan," I said in a warning tone, looking down at my lap.

This conversation made me nervous. There was an uncomfortable twist in my stomach as I sat under Logan's gaze. I didn't want to talk about my sex life, especially because it was not at all what he expected it to be. He expected me to be banging hot babes when in reality, I hooked up with one guy, Thomas, all summer long. If Logan knew, it would be awkward. I didn't want to make him think of me differently.

"Hey," Logan called out, grabbing my attention back to him. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"It's just— it's just weird," I said with a sigh.

Logan shrugged. "It doesn't have to be weird. I won't judge you."

I shook my head.

"You can tell me anything, you know," he assured me with a kind expression.

"I know," I confirmed with a nod.

I knew I shouldn't be worried about what Logan would think of me if he knew about my sexuality. He was my best friend and I knew he would support me through anything. But I couldn't help but feel like it would make things awkward for at least some amount of time. And just because he seemed chill with Vinny being gay, didn't mean he would be chill with me. It made sense in my mind, but if I said it out loud, I knew it wouldn't.

"I'm surprised you're up so early," Logan commented, leaning back on the couch.

"It's this stupid floor," I reminded him.

Logan shook his head. "You sleep like the dead usually."

He was right but I couldn't think of any other reason as to why I would be up this early without having been woken up.

"We should wake the others," Logan suggested. "Go out and get some breakfast."

"We could do that," I agreed.

The two of us hadn't even had time to move from our spots when a shirtless Vinny bounded down the steps, followed by Luna.

"You want breakfast?" Logan called out to him.

"No," was Vinny's lone response.

Logan sighed. "I'll bring him back something."

We woke the others, with many protests coming from each of them, before getting ready and heading out for breakfast.

"We could've gone to breakfast two hours from now," Archie complained from the back seat of my car. Isaac was sitting in the front while Dana and Hadley went in Logan's car.

"Sorry, I know you need your beauty sleep," I shot back, glancing at him in the rear view mirror.

"I do," he said. "You can't just be this beautiful with no effort." Archie used his hand to do a circle motion around his face.

Isaac snorted and the two of us shared a look of discontent.

Archie let out a long sigh, shaking his head. "You two just wouldn't understand," he muttered, looking out the window.

Isaac and I didn't even bother to comment on that.

A few minutes later, we met up with the others at the quaint diner down town and sat ourselves at our usual table, picking up menus.

"What am I in the mood for today?" Dana asked Logan, leaning over his shoulder to look at his menu.

"Ooo, Crystal is working today," Archie said in a hushed tone, his eyes on the waitress who was making her way to us.

Hadley gave him a deadpanned look. "She's too hot for you."

"We are hot enough for each other!" Archie defended just as Crystal made it to the table.

"Hey guys!" Crystal greeted us. "Want your regulars for drinks?"

"That would be perfect. Thanks, Crystal," Dana replied and Crystal left the table to get our drinks.

Archie watched her as she left then glanced over at me. "I'm hot enough for her, right?"

My stomach dropped in a panic. "Why are you asking me that?"

He gave me a strange look. "Just bro to bro."

I let out a small breath of relief.

"You're not," Isaac interjected, Archie flipping him off.

"I will hook up with her one of these days," Archie said like it was a promise.

"She's too hot and too old for you, bro," Logan added with a knowing look. "Give it up."

Dana turned to Logan with her eyebrows raised. "Did you just call Crystal hot?"

"Uh..." Logan glanced at me with a panicked expression. "No, I— uh."

Dana burst out into laughter, placing her hand on his shoulder. "I'm just kidding. I know she's hot."

Logan glared at her before turning back to the menu. Dana couldn't stop herself from snickering with Hadley as Crystal made her way back with our drinks. We told her our food orders and she left us with the promise that she would be back in a bit.

"I think I should ask her out before we leave," Archie said, causing the rest of us to roll our eyes at him.

"You seriously think she isn't with anyone?" Isaac asked, one eyebrow lifted.

"I'm still hung up on the fact that he thinks a college girl would want anything to do with him," Hadley pointed out with a scoff, looking down at her phone.

I couldn't help but agree with her. Crystal was at least two years older than us. She probably didn't want to waste time on a high school kid.

"Anyway, Carson," Dana interjected, changing the conversation. "I want to hear more about your summer."

I took a sip of water and cleared my throat when I noticed all eyes at the table were on me.

"It was really nothing special," I said with a shrug.

I couldn't really tell my friends I spent the summer barely sleeping because I was hooking up with a dude while everyone else slept. It was the type of exciting story I was sure Dana was looking for, but I wasn't ready for them to know. I wasn't sure if I ever would be.

"Any hot lifeguards?" Archie enthusiastically asked.

There were, but not any he would be interested in.

"Is that all you think about?" Hadley snapped, a look of irritation over taking her.

Archie shrugged. "Pretty much."

It didn't take long for Crystal to come back with our food. Archie made some lame attempt to flirt with her, earning a chuckle before she walked away.

"She thinks I'm funny," Archie boasted with a smile.

"She laughed at you," Isaac corrected him.

As we finished our meals, Logan ordered a breakfast for Vinny to go. We had to wait a few minutes after we were finished for it to come out but once it came we paid the bill and left a generous tip for Crystal.

"Wait for me, I'm gonna talk to Crystal," Archie said, patting me on the back as we were leaving the restaurant.

I shook my head at him as he sauntered toward where Crystal stood. I couldn't bear to watch as he made a fool of himself.

"Where's Arch?" Isaac asked as I sat down in the driver's seat next to him.

"Embarrassing himself with Crystal," I replied, starting the car.

Isaac let out a deep sigh. "We should just leave him here."

"If he's not out in five minutes we will."

Isaac and I waited in silence for a few moments before he spoke up.

"Hey," he said, causing me to tilt my head to glance at him.

"Hm?"

"Why did you go to Vinny's room last night?"

I looked away from Isaac, staring straight ahead as my cheeks tinged a light red.

"I thought we agreed that it doesn't matter," I muttered, my eyes stuck toward the restaurant, willing Archie to come out.

"It doesn't. I just want to know," he said.

"Why?"

Luckily, Archie came out of the restaurant at that moment with a smug look on his face, holding up his phone as he got into the backseat.

"She gave me her number," he boasted, showing us the screen.

"It's probably fake," Isaac told him as I pulled out of the parking lot.

"You're just jealous," Archie retorted, leaning back in his seat.

"Jealous that a hot girl gave you a fake number just to get you away from her?"

The two bickered as I continued driving back toward Logan's house. The others were already at the house by the time we got there. Logan was standing under a tree, shouting as he looked upwards.

"What the hell is he doing?" Archie asked as we all got out of the car.

It was only when I got closer that I realized Logan was shouting up to Vinny, who was in the tree smoking a cigarette. He had his legs hooked over a branch, hanging upside down as his brother stood under him.

"Get the fuck out of the tree!" Logan screamed.

Vinny ignored him, closing his eyes as he let himself hang.

"If you don't get out of there right now I'm going to call the cops," Logan warned in a sharp tone. "I am *not* kidding. I will tell them you're some weirdo trespassing."

"Call them," Vinny nonchalantly replied, not bothering to open his eyes.

Logan turned to me with a furious expression.

"I'm going to kill him," he said through gritted teeth. "Fine! Fall out of the tree for all I care!" Logan shouted at his brother.

The rest of us were left stunned. Dana was the first to recover, letting out a heavy sigh as she placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Can you make sure Vinny doesn't fall to his death while I go calm Logan down?" she asked me in a hushed tone.

I nodded, keeping my eyes on Vinny's still figure. It was like he got a thrill out of doing things that could get himself killed. First, with lying down in the middle of the street, and now this. It was a strange hobby to have.

"What should we do?" Hadley asked, looking nervous.

It turned out that we didn't have to do anything. A moment later, Vinny stubbed out his cigarette and started climbing out of the tree. He hung from the branch closest to the ground and then let go, landing steadily on his feet. He didn't even look us as as he walked out up to the house.

Archie shook his head and led the rest of us into the house where we heard Logan and Dana arguing in the living room.

"I don't care, Dana!" Logan yelled, throwing his hands up. "He needs to see a fucking therapist or something. He acts like a lunatic!"

"Quiet down," Dana warned, crossing her arms.

I understood Logan's frustration. He was only looking out for his brother, but the words he used could sting and leave permanent marks in someone's brain.

"You shouldn't talk about him like that," I spoke up in a quiet, even voice as I stood beside Dana.

Logan glared at me, throwing the box of food he had gotten for Vinny down on the coffee table.

"He's a fucking pain in the ass," Logan seethed, turning to stomp up the stairs.

Dana and I shared a look before she followed him to his room.

"Well, I guess that's our cue to leave," Archie spoke up, rubbing his hands together. "It's been an interesting morning guys. Let's do it again sometime."

Hadley rolled her eyes and grabbed Archie by the shirt.

"You're driving me home," she commanded, pulling him along with her.

"Okay, bossy."

Isaac and I said goodbye to the two of them as they left the house. We stood in silence for a few moments before I let out a sigh picked the box of food up from the table.

"I'm going to go put this in the fridge," I told Isaac, pointing my thumb toward the kitchen.

He nodded, putting his hands in his pockets.

"I'm going to head out," Isaac said. "I doubt Logan is gonna come out of his room anytime soon."

"Not with Dana in there," I joked.

Isaac laughed and we said our goodbyes before he left and I headed into the kitchen.

When I entered the room I was surprised to see Vinny sitting on one of the stools at the island. I eyed him, putting the food in the fridge as he opted to ignore me while staring at his phone.

"Did you hear all that?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Logan isn't exactly quiet," Vinny mumbled back.

His expression was impassive, not allowing me to tell if he had been bothered by his brother's words. Anyone would have been, but Vinny was different and seemingly uncaring about what others thought of him.

"He didn't mean what he said," I tried to console him.

Vinny looked up at me, his expression un-wavering as he titled his head to the side. I couldn't read any emotion coming from him. He stood up from the stool and leaned against the island.

"He meant it," Vinny responded, his voice even. He didn't even seem bothered by what his brother had said. He said it like it was fact.

Without another word, he pushed himself off the island and went upstairs.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading.

What did you think about Carson and Logan's conversation at the beginning? And finding out what Carson had done over the summer? The diner scene? What about what happened with Vinny after they got home?

Also, if you're an American citizen and eligible to vote, then please vote!!!! I early voted a few days ago. If you haven't voted yet you can get info at vote.org and make a plan at iwillvote.com It's super important, especially now. So please make sure you vote!!

06

Carson Hughes

Sundays at my house used to be the one day a week my family got to spend together. Dad used to run to the bakery downtown to get muffins and bagels before Mom and I woke up.

It was the only day I really got to see my dad. He was always working, or so I thought. He was actually spending any time he wasn't at work with the secretary at his office. But when I was twelve, I didn't know that. After Mom kicked him out, when she found out he had been having an affair for over a year, he hadn't been back since.

My dad was never an affectionate father. He was always bitter that I had never taken a liking to the numerous sports he tried forcing on me. I was miserable playing soccer at five years old, I couldn't even hit the ball when it was on a tee in t-ball, and football was out of the question because I was always getting hurt when I was younger.

He resented me for it, I knew he did. Like any father, he wanted a son he could live vicariously through when I became a big sports star. And it never happened. I rejected every sport I was signed up for.

That was probably part of the reason why it was so easy for him to leave and never look back when Mom kicked him out. We had nothing in common, no connection, and he only loved me out of obligation.

That feeling of being unloved by my own father was something I carried with me from a very young age. And as I sat alone in my house on Sunday morning while Mom had a shift at the hospital, the feeling plagued me.

I couldn't help but wonder what my father would think if he saw me now. If he knew his only son, the one who wasn't good at sports or any other boyish thing, was gay. Surely, he wouldn't be happy about it.

There were two instances I remembered clearly about my father's distaste toward gay people.

One was the subtle grimace when we saw two men holding hands out in public when I was eight. He had tried to shield me from seeing them, but I still saw, and couldn't understand why he didn't want me looking.

The other was less subtle. We were at my cousin's wedding when I was eleven and her two gay friends were sitting a few rows in front of us. They shared a brief kiss and Dad pouted about it through the whole ceremony until he could complain about it to Mom on the way to the reception.

"I don't care if they're gay, but they shouldn't be showing it off for everyone to see!" he had said. *"We're at a wedding for Christ's sake. Have a little respect!"*

I remembered Mom just nodding along, not wanting to argue with him over it.

I would probably never know if his thoughts had changed on the matter, though I was quite certain they hadn't. Or even if they had, he still wouldn't want a gay son.

That fear was instilled in my mind as I thought about coming out to my friends and Mom. What if they were okay with gay people, but weren't okay with *me* being gay?

It sounded stupid, even in my own head, but I couldn't pull the fear out of my brain.

I wasn't used to being alone, always hiding away at Logan's when my mother worked, but I couldn't find it in me to go there. So I sat alone in my bed with my thoughts all day, only bothering to leave my room for the bathroom or to get a snack.

Eventually, I became too bored sitting in my room and ventured downstairs.

The house was never overly messy, but it was hard to keep it tidy with Mom working so many hours and me being gone all summer. Anytime Mom wasn't working, she was sleeping, exhausted from her long days at the hospital.

So I decided to start cleaning.

I started with folding the laundry and putting a new load in. Then, I vacuumed and dusted the living room before moving onto the kitchen. I was in the middle of doing the dishes when Mom came home, a bewildered look on her face.

"Why is the house spotless?" she asked me, placing her bags down on the kitchen counter and looking around the room.

I shrugged. "Just got bored."

"So you decided to clean the whole house?" she asked in suspicion.

I just nodded, continuing to scrub the pan I had in the sink.

"I'm not complaining," Mom added with a smile, coming up next to me and giving me a kiss on the cheek. "It's just a little strange."

"Figured you could use some help," I said, a strained smile on my face. I could tell she knew that wasn't really the reason just by the look she gave me.

"Well, I appreciate it," she replied, leaning against the counter. "You gonna cook dinner too?"

"If you want me to."

"I'm just kidding, Carson," Mom responded with a laugh. "Seriously, what has gotten into you? Is everything okay?"

The words almost left my mouth, but I held them in. Mom looked at me with concern and just by looking in her eyes, I almost confessed. But, of

course, I couldn't actually do it. My mom was the most loving person I knew, yet I couldn't come out to her because I was too insecure.

I mustered up the best fake smile I could, placing the pan down in the sink before fully turning my body toward her.

"I'm fine," I assured her, trying my best to sound convincing. "I just really want to do better at helping you out around here."

"Are you and Logan fighting or something?" she asked, clearly not buying my words.

"We're not fighting," I denied with a sigh. "Is it really that surprising that I want to do something nice for you?"

Her face softened, tilting her head to the side.

"Of course not," she said, placing her hand on my shoulder. "I really do appreciate it, honey. Thank you."

It wasn't until she left the room that I let my face fall and turned back to the sink to finish the dishes.

***

I was zoning out as I sat with my friends before class, Archie and Isaac on either side of me. It took Archie snapping his fingers in my face for me to finally start paying attention to the group.

"Sorry," I muttered, looking around at each of them.

"Did you hear anything I just said?" Logan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No," I replied with a sheepish smile.

"My dad's having a cookout Saturday night," Logan repeated. "You and your mom should come."

"Mom's probably working," I told him. "But I'll be there."

"Sweet," he replied. "Gonna have to prepare for my batshit family."

"Your dad's side?"

Logan hummed in agreement and nodded.

"My grandmother is practically forcing him," he said. "She says we 'isolate ourselves from the family' but who the fuck wouldn't?"

I couldn't help but laugh at Logan's comment. His family situation was so strained, with his Uncle Robbie giving up Vinny years ago and his grandparents sympathizing with him, it was hard for Jeff and the rest of them to get along with the family. Logan always tried to make light of the situation.

"We'll all just get super drunk to suffer through it," Archie said with a wide grin.

"Is your Uncle Robbie going?" I wondered.

Logan shook his head. "My dad didn't even invite him, which is going to drive my grandmother up the fucking wall."

"So, we'll just get drunk," Dana interjected, a chorus of agreement coming from the rest of the group.

"Also, we're definitely going to the football game Friday night, right?" Hadley asked, looking around at the group.

I wasn't a huge fan of going to the games, but the others seemed to enjoy them. As long as I got to hang out with my friends, I could suffer through a couple hours of football.

"Of course, we are Hads," Archie replied, feigning offense that she had even asked the question. "It's the first game!"

"I feel kinda weird about it," Logan admitted, a look of discomfort on his face. "The football team is a bunch of assholes. They've been giving Vinny a hard time."

I wanted to mention that *he* had been giving his brother a hard time lately, but I kept my mouth shut.

"Think of it as supporting the school, not them," Archie said, raising his eyebrows. "They *are* a bunch of assholes. Always have been."

The warning bell rang and I began walking with Isaac toward our first class of the day.

"Are you okay man?" Isaac asked as we walked side by side. "You seem a little out of it today."

A deep breath pushed out from my lungs as I thought of how to respond. I was just stuck in my head about not coming out to my mom last night. It wasn't like I could say that to Isaac.

"I didn't sleep well," I told him with a shrug. "It's no biggie."

***

Mom was sleeping on the couch when I got home from school in the afternoon. It wasn't surprising that she had fallen asleep in the middle of the day. Her work tired her out, but she never complained. She deserved to sleep the whole day away for how much time she spent helping others at the hospital.

I tiptoed past her, but it was no use. She stirred awake at the sound of my shoes on the hard wood floor.

"Carson?" she asked groggily, rubbing her eyes. "Did you skip school?"

I chuckled, stopping behind the couch. "School ended. It's two-thirty."

That caused Mom to sit straight up, her eyes bugging out of her head. She always hated sleeping during the day. Whenever she had a day off, she wanted to enjoy it, not sleep through it.

Mom let out a frustrated groan, putting her face in her hands as she rested her elbows on her knees and shook her head.

"I must've fallen asleep almost as soon as I woke up," she said, turning to look at me with a frown.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," I told her, placing my hand on her shoulder. "Want me to make you some lunch?"

She smiled at me, putting her hand over mine. "That sounds amazing. Can you make a turkey sandwich with avocado?"

"Multigrain bread?"

"You know me."

I laughed, leaving my mother in the living room so that I could make her sandwich. Once I was done, I brought out her food and placed it on the coffee table in front of her. She instantly dug in and showed her appreciation.

"Thank you so much," she said before taking another bite.

I watched her silently from across the room as she finished the sandwich. The two of us were close, especially after my dad left, so it pained me that I couldn't muster up the courage to come out to her. Looking at her, I felt guilty.

"Did you have a good day at school?" Mom asked, leaning back on the couch.

"It was fine," I dully replied. "It's just school."

She laughed, shaking her head at me. "You should enjoy it now. You'll miss it when you're older."

I highly doubted that, but I wouldn't argue with her.

Mom leaned her head back to rest on the couch, closing her eyes.

"Hey Mom?" I called out after a few moments of silence.

"Hm?"

"You remember yesterday when you thought I was acting weird?"

This caused her to pick her head up, opening her eyes to look at me with concern. It felt weird being so nervous to tell her this, but I felt like I couldn't keep it from her anymore. I wanted her to know, for *someone* to know.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, worry evident in her tone.

"Yeah, everything's fine," I assured her. "I just had something on my mind. Something I want to tell you about."

Mom stared at me, giving me her undivided attention.

"You can tell me anything," she said in a soothing voice.

"I know," I replied with a nod. "I just haven't been able to get the courage to say it, or figure out how to say it."

A look of realization washed over her face.

"I think I know what this is about," she said with a sigh, giving me a small smile as my eyes widened.

"You do?"

Had my mother suspected my sexuality all along? And I was too worried about her judging me to even notice?

"You found out about Paul," she answered, effectively confusing the hell out of me.

"Who?" My eyebrows furrowed together in confusion.

"The man I've been seeing," she said. "You found out about him."

My mouth hung open slightly at this new revelation.

"Nope, that's not it," I told her, shaking my head with a look of bewilderment.

Her eyes widened as she put her hands over her mouth.

"Oh, Carson," Mom said. "I'm sorry. I swear I was gonna tell you, I just wanted to wait until I was sure it was serious."

Mom hadn't dated since my dad left. Like at all. The thought of her being in a relationship was strange, though I didn't hate the idea. She was lonely and I knew that.

"Mom, it's fine," I assured her, standing to move to the other couch so that I was sitting next to her. "You don't have to tell me anything about it until you're ready."

"How did I luck out with the best son ever?" she asked, tossing her arm around me and pulling me closer.

I laughed as I returned the hug.

"But seriously, I was going to tell you soon," Mom added with a serious expression.

"So it's serious then?"

She smiled, looking down at her lap. "I think so."

"I'm happy for you," I said, my tone sincere. "When did you start seeing him?"

"A couple weeks before you came home," she answered with a blush on her cheeks. "He works for the medical equipment supplier so he comes into the hospital a lot."

"Do I get to meet him?"

"Of course, you do!" she replied, lightly hitting my shoulder. "I do take your opinion seriously you know. I think you'll like him."

"If you like him, I'll like him."

"He has a son. I think he's around your age," she continued.

I did my best to show my support for her. I was truly glad she had found someone. In a few months, I would be off at college and she would be here all alone. She needed *someone* to keep her company.

"I'm sorry, I completely stole your moment," she said after a few moments. "What were you going to say?"

Admittedly, even I had forgotten that I had been about to come out to my mother. And now that she reminded me, the nerves started kicking in again.

"I..." I trailed as she looked at me expectantly. "I um, I'm gay."

She was silent for a moment, her face impassive.

"Honey..." she trailed, placing a comforting hand down on my knee. "You were nervous to tell me that?"

"I'm just..." I sighed, taking a deep breath in. "I'm just nervous about it in general. About anyone knowing about it."

"So no one knows?" she asked.

I apprehensively shook my head.

"Not even Logan?" Mom wondered, seeming surprised.

"No."

She nodded, a thoughtful expression on her face before she smiled at me.

"I'll keep it to myself until you're ready," she assured me.

I gave her a thankful expression, trying to let go of the tension in my shoulders as I let out a deep breath. Her grin widened as she moved her hand to my back, rubbing comforting circles on it.

"So, have there been any boys I should know about?" she asked, her eyebrows raised in question.

I barked out a loud laugh and shook my head.

And the tension finally seemed to leave my body.

**

Hey everyone. Thanks for reading!

What did you think about learning about Carson's dad? Any predictions for what's going to go on at the Taylor family cookout? What about Carson coming out to his mom? Were you surprised this happened so early on?

Let me know!

I'm super stressed about the election and needed to do something to get my mind off of it for a little while so here it is.

07

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

Carson Hughes

Football games always drew a large crowd at our school. There wasn't much else to do in our small town, so the big Friday night games were what many looked forward to.

I couldn't care less about them, but my friends enjoyed it, so here I was.

It hadn't yet cooled down from the heat earlier in the day and I could feel the warmth of the metal I was sitting on through my jeans. We were crammed on the scorching bleachers, too close with everyone around us for comfort.

Seth Powers was having an incredible game to say the least. He was connecting on all his passes to his best friend and star wide-receiver, Darren Sanderson. On top of that, Seth was running the ball and scoring touchdowns. It was like he was unstoppable, though it was hard to root for the guy because he was a total asshole. He was a talented football player, and knew it, but his arrogance was suffocating and I could feel it from where I sat.

"I'm so bored of this," Logan grumbled from beside me as Seth scored another touchdown, everyone around us standing in cheer.

"Bored of what?" I asked, leaning closer so he could hear me. "Watching football or Seth?"

"Both," he replied, crossing his arms over his chest as he glared down at the field once everyone sat down. "Between you and me, I think Hadley has a thing for Seth."

I paused on the thought, stealing a short glance at Hadley who was intently staring down at the field.

"I don't know..." I trailed, turning my gaze back to Logan. "What makes you think that?"

Logan shrugged, turning away from the field to look at me.

"She seems like she's interested in *someone* ," Logan told me. "I can't explain it. But I think it's Seth. It just seems like that."

I didn't know whether to agree with him or not. Seth definitely didn't seem like Hadley's type. She was always into more brainy guys, not meat-headed, asshole, football player types.

"Wanna go with me to get some candy?" Logan asked me after I didn't respond.

I quickly nodded in agreement and the two of us stood up from the bleachers, scooting down the aisle to get to the stairs and then hurrying down them.

Once Logan had gotten his box of candy, the two of us made our way back toward the bleachers, running into Spencer who was busy looking down at his camera.

"Sorry," Spencer mumbled as he slowly looked up.

Logan shrugged. "No big deal. How are you?"

Spencer and I made eye contact before he quickly looked away, his eyes everywhere but on us.

"Doin' alright," he said. "How about you?"

"Good, good," Logan replied.

"You still doing yearbook?" I asked him, motioning toward the camera in his hands.

Spencer briefly looked down at the camera and then back up at me and nodded.

"Yeah," he said, clearing his throat. "I'm in charge of photography this year."

"That's awesome," I told him with a small smile.

"Hey, Spence," Logan started before he could say anything. "My family's having a cookout this weekend if you and Marina wanna come by. For Vin."

Spencer gave him a wary look and even I was wondering what Logan was doing. It was no secret that Vinny had shut everyone out, his two best friends included. Logan's brother wouldn't be happy if his friends showed up.

"I uh, I don't think that'd be a good idea," Spencer replied after clearing his throat. "Vinny doesn't talk to us anymore. Like at all."

Logan nodded, briefly looking back up at the bleachers then bringing his eyes to Spencer once again.

"Just keep it in mind," Logan told him. "It was good catching up."

And with that Logan started his way back to the bleachers, leaving Spencer and I stunned for a moment before I bid the other boy goodbye and hastily followed Logan.

"What was that about?" I asked him as soon and I caught up.

"What was what about?" he asked, glancing at me through the corner of his eye.

"You know what," I told him, my eyebrows raised. "You know Vinny isn't talking to them."

Logan shrugged, turning to briefly look at the field and then head back to our seats. "It doesn't hurt to extend an invitation."

I didn't respond to that and instead remained silent as the two of us retook our seats with our friends.

Our team had somehow ended up scoring again in the time that we had been gone, the excitement of the complete blowout shaking the stands we were sitting in. Not even the atmosphere in the crowd could get me excited about this football game.

Just as the excitement started dying down, our team caught an interception which caused the crowd to roar again. I rolled my eyes as everyone around us stood, Logan and I staying put.

Part of me wished I could care about this game, so then at least I would feel less isolated from my friends. Keeping part of myself from them was eating me alive more and more recently, especially since coming out to my mom. It felt like they didn't know the real me at times, and it was through no fault of their own.

I just couldn't bring myself to do it. That was on me.

"Aren't you guys going to act a little excited?" Dana asked us after she sat down. She had a wide grin on her face, interlocking her arm with Hadley's beside her.

"How am I supposed to act excited when I literally do not care about this?" Logan asked with a blank face, causing Dana to glare at him because of his tone.

She looked over at me and then back at Logan. "At least you guys have each other."

Dana turned back to the game as Hadley excitedly whispered something in her ear, pointing down at the field. Dana chuckled and shook her head but continued watching the game anyway.

I let out a sigh and took my phone out of my pocket, not even bothering to look like I was paying attention. As I scrolled through Instagram, I found myself stuck on a picture Thomas had posted. It was from camp this

summer, one that I had taken of him. I clicked on his name and looked through his profile, suddenly envying the boy I spent my summer with.

I couldn't help but envy the way he was out to the world, displaying who he was without a care at all. He had a lot of friends, he was really well-liked. Just the thought of being able to be like him was enough to fill me with jealousy.

He was so open and I was nothing but a coward, letting my own insecurities haunt me and keep me from truly living the way I wanted.

***

Leaving the game with a few minutes left was a smart decision on Logan's part. While our friends were disappointed they couldn't watch the end of the game, no one wanted to be stuck in the traffic trying to get out of the school parking lot. There was one way in and one way out and that led to lots of waiting.

I was ready to head home before Hadley suggested going to the bowling alley, which everyone agreed to and I tagged along so I could actually enjoy a night with my friends without it having to be at a stupid football game.

We all sat on the couches at our lanes after we ordered our food. Hadley was first up, as she insisted since this was her idea after all.

"Yo! Crystal texted me back!" Archie excitedly exclaimed, nudging me on the shoulder and showing me his phone. All she said back was a simple "hi."

"You waited days for that?" I asked him, my eyebrows knitting together as I shared a look with Isaac.

"She's just playing hard to get," he said with a shrug, grinning down at his phone. "You know how girls are. They don't reply right away."

I didn't know anything about that, but I didn't say that to Archie as he locked his phone and slid it into his pocket.

"You're not going to text her back?" I asked with a look of confusion.

"Nah," he told me. "Not for a little while. I can't let her think I'm too desperate."

"But you are," Isaac interjected with a knowing look.

"Yeah, but she can't know that," Archie replied with a shrug.

Hadley turned around with a glare on her face after she finished her turn.

"Trust me, Arch, *everyone* knows you're desperate for Crystal," Hadley told him, taking a seat beside him as Dana stood up from the other couch to take her turn. "And she's not dumb. She knows too."

"Just you wait," he said, pointing his finger at her with a serious look on his face. "I'll have Crystal by next week."

Hadley scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "You're disgusting," she said.

I didn't bother listening to the two of them bicker as I watched Dana take her turn. Once she was done, Logan was next and he was especially terrible at bowling. Logan wasn't really good at anything that required any sort of coordination and he proved it when he sent the ball straight into the gutter twice. He let out a loud groan, putting his hands on his head and pulling at his hair before turning around to reclaim his seat.

"Why did I agree to do this?" he asked me as he sat back down on the couch to my right.

I laughed, shaking my head. "Because you love hanging out with us?"

"Maybe that's it," he said, grabbing his soda off the table in front of us and taking a sip.

After Isaac took his turn, it was mine. I stood up and picked out a bowling ball before standing at the front of the lane and got ready to release the ball. Just before I was about to throw the ball, some voices to my left caught my

attention. With the ball still in my hand, I turned to look at a group of guys at the lane next to us standing over two other guys who were sitting at their lane.

Before I could look away, one of the guys from the group pushed one who was sitting and grabbed something off the table in front of them. This caused one of the sitting boys to stand up and try to grab whatever the larger boy had taken while the rest of his group laughed at the smaller boy.

The altercation could have been brushed off as friends messing with their friend until the larger guy shoved the smaller one away from him and shouted something obscene.

"Get off me, fag!"

This caused me to put the ball back down on the rack and turn my body completely to face the group to my left. The language of the large boy had also caught the attention of my friends, causing their conversation to cease as they looked on.

Logan stood up and turned to face the group. As the larger boy shoved the smaller one again, Logan wasted no time rushing over to the group, followed by Archie then me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Logan questioned, gaining the attention of the group and the two smaller boys.

"Mind your business," the larger boy said, his eyes narrowing as he looked at Logan.

Archie didn't say anything as he walked over to him and yanked the phone the larger boy had stolen out of his hand. He didn't look away from the guy as he handed the phone back to the smaller boy.

The rest of our friends had joined us as I went to stand by the boy who was still sitting.

"What the fuck?" the larger guy said, glaring at Archie.

"Just leave them alone and get out of here," Logan said in a calm tone, crossing his arms over his chest. Logan wasn't really a threatening looking guy but his confidence always threw people off.

The main guy of the group just shook his head and said something under his breath before turning around to leave, his friends following him. Once they were out of sight, I looked to the two boys.

"Are you okay?" I asked them, my brows knitting together in concern.

The one who was standing nodded and sat back down beside the other boy, putting his arm around him.

"We're okay, thanks for stepping in," he said as the other boy leaned into his side. "They're just some assholes we go to school with."

"I fucking hate people like that," Logan said, his lips pointed downward in a frown.

After making sure the two boys were okay, the rest of us went back to our game. When I was done taking my turn, I couldn't help but think of what had just happened.

Something I hadn't thought too much about was the reaction of others if I decided to come out. I was so worried about my friends, who had shown tonight the type of people they were, but this brought about another fear. It made me think about the way that Seth and the guys on the football team treated Vinny.

I didn't want to face that hatred and fear I had never known. The thought of it formed a twist in my insides and made me sick to my stomach.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think about the football game and the conversation with Spencer? What about what happened afterward at the bowling alley?

Let me know!

08

Carson Hughes

It wasn't surprising that cars already lined the street by the time I got to Logan's house the next day. His extended family was always early for these events, effectively pissing the hosts off.

There was a chorus of noise and voices coming from the backyard, so I made my way into the house with the hopes of meeting up with Logan in there before having to greet the rest of his family.

The only one in the house was Val, who was in the kitchen still preparing food for her early guests.

"Need any help?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "No, I'm doing this as slowly as possible so I don't have to go out there."

I chuckled, leaning against the counter across from her.

"I don't blame you," I told her.

"They've been here for almost an hour already," Val said with an irritated expression. "And just expected us to be ready for them."

Even I was a little earlier than they told me to be here. It was still about twenty minutes before this thing was actually supposed to start.

Just then, Vinny tiptoed down the stairs, glancing out the window as if he was making sure he wouldn't be seen. He walked over to Val and took food out of the bowl she was preparing.

"Get your hands out of that!" Val exclaimed, swatting his hand away.

" *Mom* ," Vinny hissed in a low tone. "Keep it down. I don't want them knowing I'm here."

"They already know," Val said, placing her hands on her hips. "Your grandmother asked about you as soon as she got here."

Vinny rolled his eyes, taking more food out of the bowl and running away to his room before his mother could swat him again.

"Is Logan outside?" I asked Val, glancing out the window toward the group of people and not seeing my best friend.

"I'm sure he and Dana are trying to hide somewhere," she answered. "I don't blame you if you want to hide out in here."

She picked up two different dishes in each hand, ready to bring them outside. I shook my head at her, grabbing one of the dishes and following her out of the sliding door and into the backyard.

As soon as we made it outside, I could hear the commotion of all the members of the Taylor family speaking at once. Jeff stood in front of the grill, cooking while his mother spoke beside him.

Jeff's three sisters were loud as always, just like their mother. Sometimes it seemed as if Jeff was the only normal one to make it out of this family which was probably why he felt so disconnected from all of them.

"Valerie, you've got Logan's friend doing work," Jeff's sister, Marcy, said when she saw us. "Vincent should be helping you. Where is he?"

Val kept a strained smile on her face, not even bothering to respond to Marcy as we set the dishes down on the table.

"Logan and that girl left a while ago too. Why aren't they helping you?" one of Jeff's other sisters, Carol, added.

I had to keep myself from rolling my eyes at her. *That girl* was Logan's girlfriend of two years, who he had been friends with for years prior to their relationship. They had all met Dana plenty of times.

"Maybe they got sick of you asking them questions as if you've never met Dana before," Jeff cut in as he walked away from the grill, his mother following him.

"I didn't know they were dating!" Carol defended, earning nods of support from Marcy and the last sister, Ruth.

Jeff didn't even bother answering his sister as he came over to greet me.

"Thanks for coming, Carson," he said. "It's nice to have at least some normal people here."

"No problem," I told him with a small smile. "Mom's sorry she couldn't make it."

"Tell her not to worry about it. She works really hard," Jeff said, patting me on the shoulder. "I have no idea where Logan and Dana went, but I'm sure you'll be able to find them around here somewhere."

I nodded, walking away from the family in search for my two friends. It didn't take me long to find the two of them hiding out in the basement, cuddled together on the couch.

Logan's head turned quickly with a startled look on his face as I opened the basement door. Once he realized it was me, his face softened.

"Thank God it's you," he said with a sigh of relief, relaxing into the couch. "I thought it was gonna be my Aunt Marcy or something."

"You know, she still doesn't know who I am," Dana added as I sat beside her on the couch.

"None of them do apparently," I told her to which she scoffed and shook her head.

"I've been friends with you guys since like sixth grade!" she exclaimed.

"They're purposely ignorant," Logan commented.

We were only sitting in the basement for a little while longer before the rest of our friends showed up, opting for walking through the house to get to us instead of having to walk through the backyard and see the family.

"We miss anything good?" Archie asked, plopping down on the couch beside Logan.

"No, we've been hiding in here," I answered.

"I think we're pushing our luck," Logan added with a sigh. "My dad is going to force us outside eventually."

"I'm okay with that," Isaac said, standing from his seat. "I'm starving and it smells like the food is done. I'll go out there willingly."

"Bring us back some food!" Hadley called after him.

Just as Isaac was about to leave the basement to go outside, Jeff opened the door and poked his head in.

"Come outside," he directed at Logan. "You've hidden in here long enough."

Logan let out a heavy sigh and stood from his spot, the rest of us following him.

"I at least need you out there to distract them from talking about Vinny for a little while," Jeff said to his son in a hushed tone as Logan walked over to him.

"What are they saying?" Logan asked him.

"Same old shit," Jeff replied, turning around to walk back out to the yard.

I went outside with the rest of my friends, following after Jeff. We were immediately being stared at by the family as soon as we were visible, Isaac heading straight to the food without paying them a glance.

"Logan, why would you invite so many people?" his grandmother asked, he hands on her hips. "This is supposed to be a family day."

"We told him to invite his friends, Ma," Jeff interjected before Logan said anything.

All I wanted was to get some food and sit as far away from the family as possible. They all had a way of prying into your life and making you as uncomfortable as possible with no remorse. I wanted no part of it.

I took after Isaac and headed over to the food, leaving Logan to deal with his grandmother's criticisms. Isaac and I sat down as far away from the family as we could once we got our meals, Logan and Dana glaring at us as the grandmother spoke in front of them. Hadley and Archie stood off to the side, seemingly bickering about something.

"What time do you think they'll leave?" Isaac asked me, taking a bite out of his burger.

I shrugged, briefly glancing over at him.

"Not for a while," I replied. "You know how it usually goes."

Isaac hummed in agreement but didn't say anything else.

A motion in the house caught my attention. I squinted my eyes, trying to see through the window. I didn't have to squint for long when Vinny opened the sliding door and Luna came barreling out of the house, running around to everyone to greet them.

Jeff's sisters had looks of discomfort on their faces as Luna sniffed them and ran away.

"Vincent!" his grandmother shouted when she saw him standing in the doorway. She left Logan and Dana, causing them to sprint over to where Isaac and I sat.

The grandmother stood in front of a bored looking Vinny like she was chastising him. I noticed Logan watched the two closely like he was about

to get up and join their conversation.

Archie and Hadley joined us a moment later with their plates of food.

"I might have to go back there and save him," Logan said with a groan as he continued watching his brother and grandmother.

"You're going by yourself," Dana added, taking a bite of her food. "We've only been out here for a few minutes and I already need a break from them."

I couldn't help but chuckle at the serious look on Dana's face.

Eventually Jeff made his way over to his son and mother, somehow convincing Vinny to stay outside with everyone. He went over to Luna and started throwing a frisbee for her while the rest of the family continued to mingle.

Eventually, it started getting dark out, the sun beginning to set behind the trees. Jeff gave us all a look that basically said we had to go interact with the family, so that was what we did. We stood around a fire, listening to Jeff's sister Marcy talk about her last minute wedding with her husband earlier in the year.

I leaned up against the porch next to Vinny who looked bored out of his mind. Just as I was about to say something to him, Marcy beat me to it.

"Vincent, do you ever go see your father?" she asked him, taking a sip out of her wine glass.

Vinny raised his eyebrows at her. "I see him right now," he replied, pointing to Jeff on his other side.

"I mean your *real* father," she clarified as if he didn't know what she was saying.

"Marcy," Jeff snapped, a look of anger on his face.

It was strange to see Jeff angry. I was at the house all the time and I rarely ever saw him look like that. Logan looked uncomfortable as he stood across from me.

"Don't get angry at me, Jeff," Marcy snapped back. "You probably don't let the boy see his father. Lord knows you haven't spoken to Robbie in years."

" *I'm* his father," Jeff told her.

"I just think if he was with his real family, he wouldn't be like this," Marcy continued, causing Jeff's face to turn beat red.

All I wanted to do was walk away from this uncomfortable conversation, but I felt stuck.

"Come on, Marcy," Vinny started with a chuckle, gaining everyone's attention. "Not you lecturing us about *real family* when you're on husband number five."

Marcy let out a loud gasp while Jeff boomed with laughter, grasping onto his son's shoulder.

"You're going to let him talk to me like that?" Marcy exclaimed, directing angry eyes at Jeff.

"Yes," he instantly responded with another laugh.

It was surprising to see Vinny look over at his father with a slight smile on his face, chuckling a bit as he did. It was enough to bring on a smile of my own.

"This is why he's like this!" Marcy exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. "You let him get away with everything and you don't let Robbie be his father!"

This sobered Jeff up quickly, and again, I felt like I wanted to leave. I looked at the rest of my friends to see that they seemed as shocked as me at Marcy's outburst. Jeff's family was always intrusive and giving unsolicited

advice, but to be talking about Vinny this way in front of everyone, and to his face, was too far. And Jeff was about to let her know that.

"Like what?" Jeff spat, causing Vinny to jump a bit and bump into my side.

"Isolating himself from the family, being disrespectful, changing his sexuality..." she listed off.

"Hold up, Marcy," Logan stopped her, holding up his hand. "That's enough."

"And he is almost the same way!" Marcy cut him off.

"You're not going to come here and say shit about my kids, Marcy," Jeff seethed. "You want me to start saying shit about yours? Because I could say a lot."

Vinny chuckled at my side, slowly moving closer to me like he was trying to leave the group unnoticed.

"He's not your kid, Jeff," Marcy pointed out and that was when Jeff started screaming at her and Vinny made it out of the group.

I watched as Vinny walked over to the cooler by one of the tables and take out a couple beers before heading toward an area of trees in the yard.

Logan stood next to his father, looking as if he had no idea what to do with the man currently having a screaming match with his sister. I took the opportunity to sneak away from the group as well and follow Vinny to the trees.

It didn't take me long to find him. He was sitting up against the trunk, sipping on his beer and finishing the can before I even made my way to him.

"You finished that fast," I commented, startling him. He let out a deep breath and set his glare on me.

"What the fuck is up with you and scaring me all the time?" he asked me, shaking his head and cracking open another can.

I chuckled, sitting down beside him. "I don't mean to."

He just let out a grunt in response and began drinking out of the newly opened can.

"Your Aunt Marcy is uh..."

Vinny laughed. "She's a fucking bitch."

"To put it plainly, yeah," I agreed with a laugh of my own.

Vinny just shrugged. "I don't expect anything less when I see her. I will give her props though, she's being particularly entertaining tonight."

I shook my head at him. "That wasn't entertaining, Vinny. It was bullshit."

He shrugged again. "Look, I don't need you to come give me some pep talk or whatever the fuck you're doing right now."

"I just want to make sure you're okay."

Because for some reason that really mattered to me.

He gave me a strange look, his sharp features pinching together as his eyebrows furrowed. He really was handsome, and looking at him under the moonlight made that even more obvious.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?" Vinny asked.

"Because she said some really messed up stuff," I told him. "Anyone would be upset by that."

"Well, I'm not," he retorted with a sigh. "I don't give a shit what Marcy has to say. She's a dumbass."

I just stared at him silently as he continued drinking out of the can. Part of me wanted to say something about his drinking, but I kept it to myself. Vinny didn't need me lecturing him, and if I did, he would make that very clear.

"Do you ever want to see your dad?" I asked him after we sat in silence for a while, Vinny now being on his third beer.

He let out a humorless laugh, resting his head back on the trunk and turning to look at me.

"I live with my dad. I see him every day," he reminded me.

"Right, yeah, I meant Robbie," I corrected myself, feeling a little embarrassed at my slip up. Vinny had always referred to Jeff as his dad, even when he used to see Robbie when he was younger.

"No," he answered plainly. "I don't know him, never see him, don't care to."

"But don't you ever wonder about him?" I asked, Vinny shaking his head. "I wonder about mine all the time," I admitted, though I didn't know why I did. Especially to him.

"Our situations are different," he said. "Can't really compare them."

He was right, but I couldn't help but want to have some sort of commonality with him. Other than the obvious.

My eyes stayed locked on the side of his face, focusing on his sharp features. I couldn't explain to myself why I was suddenly looking at him differently. His face was etched into a frown and his eyes were glossy from the effects of the alcohol, but under the night sky with the stars over us, he looked beautiful.

Maybe it was the way his rough exterior cracked a little when it was just him and I under the tree, Vinny staring up at the sky while I stared at him. The little bit of himself that he showed me only made me want to know him more.

I didn't know how long Vinny and I sat under the stars but it still didn't seem long enough.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading.

What did you think of the chapter? What about the rest of the Taylor family? What about Carson and Vinny's interactions?

Let me know!

09

Carson Hughes

Time spent at Logan's was a lot better when his extended family wasn't around. The six of us sat downstairs in the living room watching a series on Netflix that I didn't even know the name of. It was hard for me to even pay attention to it, but Dana swore it was good as she turned it on.

"I really don't get this," Logan said, looking at his girlfriend with furrowed eyebrows.

"If you just paid attention you would," Dana said in an overly sweet tone, like she was trying her hardest not to seem annoyed at her boyfriend.

Logan was never one to pay attention to something when he had to read subtitles and while I tried to follow along at first, I ended up zoning out while Hadley, Dana, and Isaac were entrenched in the show. Archie hadn't even been paying attention from the start, texting on his phone the entire time.

"Are you talking to Crystal?" I asked him, causing Archie to look up for the first time in a while.

He shook his head. "Nah."

"What, did she stop answering you?" Logan joked, leaning back in his seat.

"Can you guys be quiet?" Hadley asked, not taking her eyes off the screen.

Logan and I shared strange looks while Archie flipped Logan off and turned back to his phone.

"You don't even need to hear it, you're reading subtitles," I pointed out.

"You guys talking makes it hard to concentrate," Hadley replied, still staring straight ahead.

It wasn't worth arguing over and I didn't want to bother her anyway, so I stayed quiet and took out my phone to scroll through Instagram. I mindlessly liked pictures posted by my peers and we all sat in silence for a while with only the TV making noise.

Only the television was heard until Luna started barking like crazy from upstairs, startling all of us. For a few moments we ignored her, thinking she would eventually stop or Vinny would take care of her, but she kept going.

"Luna!" Logan yelled from his spot on the couch. "Stop it!"

Luna came running down the stairs and over to the couch, nudging Logan with her nose, before running back upstairs and continuing her barking. I turned to see her at the top of the stairs as she barked, then she ran down the hallway and back to the top of the stairs.

"Vinny!" Logan yelled. "Can you get Luna?"

There was no answer and Luna continued her barking.

"Maybe he's still asleep?" I wondered, glancing back to Logan who just shook his head.

"There's no way," he said, standing up from the couch and heading to the bottom of the stairs. "Luna, come here. Do you need to go out?"

She didn't listen to him and just ran down the hallway. The situation was strange and I had an uncomfortable pit in my stomach. Luna was a very obedient dog, trained from a young age. It wasn't normal for her to defy Logan or anyone in the household.

"What's she doing?" I asked him, standing from the couch to go over to Logan.

He just shrugged and started going up the stairs. Luna met him at the top and I saw him follow her down the hallway until they were both out of my

sight. A few moments later, Logan called down the stairs.

"One of you call an ambulance!" he shouted, causing my eyes to widen. The rest of our friends all stood up from where they sat, completely forgetting about the show on the TV.

Dana rushed past me and climbed the stairs. I followed her as I dialed 911, holding the phone up to my ear. When I got to the top of the stairs, Dana was standing in the doorway of the bathroom with her hand over her mouth. I stood beside her just as an operator picked up the phone and my mouth hung open as I took in the sight in front of me.

"911, what's your emergency?" the operator answered.

I was silent for a moment as I looked at Logan sitting on the bathroom floor with an unconscious Vinny, holding his brother's head in his lap as he looked up at me with a panicked expression. The operator repeated herself and I let the shock subside.

"Hi, my friend's brother is unconscious, there's blood coming from his head," I said in a rushed tone, not able to keep my eyes away from Vinny.

The operator asked me some more questions while telling me an ambulance was on its way, and then hung up the phone.

"Are they coming?" Logan asked, his voice quick and shaking.

I nodded. "What happened?"

"I don't fucking know!" Logan shouted as he held Vinny's head in his lap.

"Logan, calm down," Dana said, kneeling beside him and placing a comforting hand on his back. "Don't move him too much."

Logan's breath was uneven, nothing able to calm him down as he stared down at his unconscious brother. Seeming too afraid to injure him further, Logan sat still with his hand under Vinny's head. I was frozen for a moment before I turned and went downstairs to the rest of our shocked friends.

"What's going on?" Isaac asked as soon as I was in his line of vision.

"Vinny's hurt," I told him, pulling out my phone again.

"Hurt how?" Hadley wondered with wide eyes.

"I don't know," I said, fumbling with my phone in my hand. "Looks like he hit his head."

I searched my phone for Jeff's contact and called him, my hand shaking slightly as I brought the phone up to my ear.

"Hello?" Jeff answered almost instantly, sounding confused as to why I was calling him.

"Hey, uh, Vinny's hurt," I told him. "Looks like he hit his head or something. Logan's with him."

"We're coming home right now," Jeff said in a rushed tone. "Did you call an ambulance?"

"Yeah, they're on their way."

"We'll meet you at the hospital."

Just after I hung up with Jeff, the ambulance had arrived. I directed them to where Vinny was and they quickly got him onto a stretcher and into the ambulance.

Once the ambulance was gone, it was like time stood still for a moment. None of us knew what to do and nobody moved. We stood downstairs, not saying anything for a while with an uncomfortable air surrounding us. We stayed like this until Logan seemed to finally come to his senses, grabbing his car keys and rushing out the door with Dana hot on his heels.

"Should we go with them?" Isaac asked, his eyes widened slightly at the stress of the situation.

I pursed my lips together, watching out the window as Logan pulled out of the driveway and sped down the road.

"I'll go and keep you guys posted," I told him, looking around to the rest of my friends.

We didn't all need to be there, but I knew that the others wanted to be there for Logan.

"You go, Carson," Archie agreed while Hadley nodded beside him. "I'll make sure Luna's all set then lock up before we leave."

And with that, I bid goodbye to my friends and left for the hospital.

***

The Taylors, and Dana, were already at the hospital by the time I arrived. Jeff looked particularly antsy as he stood in front of his family with his hands on his hips, his eyes darting around everywhere in the room.

I could feel the worry radiating off the family as I sat with them, and I couldn't help but contribute to the concern.

It didn't take as long as I thought it would for the doctor to come tell us about Vinny, but it definitely felt longer than it was. The uncertainty of what had happened was eating the family alive and making it even harder for them to wait. All they knew was their son was unconscious, and having so little information was troubling.

"Family of Vincent Taylor?" the doctor called out as she came into the waiting area.

Jeff immediately walked over to her, his hands in fists at his sides as he anxiously listened to what she was saying. The rest of us stood up but stayed behind as Jeff finished talking to the doctor. Jeff nodded along as she spoke, and once she was finished, he motioned for us to go over.

"What happened?" Val asked anxiously as soon as we reached him.

"She said he passed out from dehydration and hit his head," Jeff explained, one of his hands pulling at his hair. "Apparently he doesn't even remember the last time he drank water."

"He's awake?" Logan asked.

Jeff nodded. "She spoke to him. He's doing fine, doesn't have any memory loss from what she can tell. He remembers being in the bathroom this morning just before he passed out."

Dana and I followed the family down to Vinny's room but stayed out in the hall when they entered. I leaned up against the wall across from the door, crossing my arms over my chest as Dana stood beside me.

"Has anything like this happened before?" I asked her, turning my head so I was facing her.

"Kinda of," she replied. "He used to, like, not eat a lot and he would get dizzy spells, but he was never hospitalized."

Before I could respond, Spencer and Marina came into my line of vision from down the hallway. I tentatively waved them over, Spencer making eye contact and nudging Marina to lead her to us.

Spencer looked stressed, his hair sticking up in different directions as if he had been pulling at it. Marina was more composed, but I could still sense worry in her expression as her arms tightened around her abdomen and her lips were etched in a frown.

"How is he?" Spencer asked, looking at me with wide eyes as he nervously wrung his hands together.

"They said he's going to be fine," I assured him. "Did Jeff call you?"

Spencer shook his head, glancing toward the door to Vinny's room. "Logan texted."

The four of us stood outside for a few more minutes until Jeff and Val came out of the room and told us to go in while they spoke to the doctor

elsewhere.

Vinny was glaring straight ahead, sitting up with his arms crossed over his chest when we walked in. He was now sporting a white bandage on his head where he was bleeding just a couple hours ago. His mouth dipped in a frown as his eyebrows knitted together and his eyes squinted in annoyance. It was like the very fact that he was here was irritating him.

Logan stood up from the chair beside Vinny's bed when we walked in, greeting all of us before throwing his arm around Dana and pulling her close. Vinny's posture stayed rigid, staring straight ahead as if he didn't notice the rest of us had entered the room.

There was a palpable tension in the room that I didn't expect walking in here. Vinny knew of our presence but he didn't acknowledge it. There was an uncomfortable feeling in my chest as I thought about how he most likely didn't want us there.

Without a word, Vinny stood up from the bed and started making his way toward the door before Logan stopped him by placing a hand on his chest.

"Hey, you need to stay here," Logan said in an urgent tone. "The doctors aren't done looking at you."

"Well, I'm done being here," he said, shaking himself out of Logan's grasp and starting to move toward the door again.

He was almost out the door before Marina's shaking voice stopped him.

" *Vin* ," she said, moving toward him. "Please just wait here. We'll go."

Vinny turned around but moved his gaze to the floor as Marina stood in front of him. She said something in a hushed tone but he didn't acknowledge it.

"You're not supposed to be here," Vinny muttered, not even bothering to look up at her.

Marina pressed her lips together. "Okay."

Spencer stood in the corner of the room watching the two of them with an unreadable expression, but I could tell from how he was before we came in the room that it pained him to hear that his friend didn't want him there.

Marina and Spencer left the room, Logan following after them. Dana waited a moment before following her boyfriend out of the room, leaving me alone with Vinny.

The air around me felt thick as I looked around the bland room. Our silence bounced against the walls, seeming to add to the tension in the air.

Vinny still stood near the door, staring straight ahead before moving back to the bed to sit down. I expected him to tell me to leave, but he didn't, so I stayed. He may not have wanted to show it, but he didn't want to be alone at that moment.

"Does your head hurt?" I asked him, sitting down beside him on the edge of the bed.

"No," he immediately responded, his pinched expression slightly falling.

"Something really similar happened to me a few years ago," I told him in a light tone, a small smile sprouting on my face. "My dad tried forcing me into baseball and there was a morning practice so I didn't have time to eat breakfast and I passed out in the outfield."

He tried to hide it, but Vinny allowed a chuckle out of his mouth, his lips quirking up just a bit.

"That's fucking embarrassing," he said and I threw my head back with a loud laugh.

"I was just glad to get out of baseball," I admitted, turning to glance at him to see that he was already looking at me. His lips were quirked up in a close-lipped smile as his eyes concentrated on my face.

After another moment, Vinny looked down at his lap and his smile fell slightly.

"I need a smoke," he muttered, keeping his eyes down and starting to bounce his leg.

I didn't know what compelled me to do it, but I reached my hand out to his knee to study his leg. As soon as my hand made contact with him, Vinny's eyes widened and shot back to my face.

I couldn't tell if his expression was one of discomfort, so I removed my hand almost immediately. Once I wasn't touching him, he seemed to relax as he put more space between us.

"Sorry, I—" I was cut off by Logan and Dana re-entering the room.

"It's just going to be couple more minutes," Logan said as he walked over to us.

He gave me a look that I couldn't quite decipher before looking back to Dana who motioned for me to follow her. Apparently Logan wanted some alone time with his brother.

We left the room, leaving Logan and Vinny alone. It didn't take much longer for Jeff and Val to come back with the doctor and discharge Vinny from the hospital. Marina and Spencer stayed until Vinny could leave. Even if he didn't seem to want their support, he had it anyway.

"Carson?" my mother's voice called out from behind me as I followed the Taylors down the hall.

I turned at the sound of her worried voice. She stood behind me in her blue scrubs, clutching a clipboard tightly in her hands as she stared at me with wide eyes.

"What are you doing here? Is everything alright?" she asked me, grabbing my arm and pulling me off to the side so we were no longer standing in the middle of the hall.

"I'm fine, Ma," I assured her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

She seemed to relax at my words, the tension leaving her body and her posture loosening.

"What happened?" she repeated.

"Vinny Taylor passed out and hit his head," I explained, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion. "I came for Logan."

I tried to convince her I only came here for Logan, and she seemed to buy it, but I wasn't beyond convincing myself that.

"Is he okay?" she asked, swapping the confusion for concern once again.

"I think so," I said with a nod, letting out a shallow breath.

"So Paul came in earlier today," Mom told me, somewhat apprehensively with a nervous look taking over her features.

"Oh yeah?"

"I had told him that I told you about us," she said with a nervous smile. "And today he told me he wants to meet you some time soon. Maybe have dinner."

I nodded with an understanding hum.

"Would that be okay with you?" Mom asked with a hopeful look.

"Yeah, definitely," I assured her with a grin. "Just tell me when."

"And you'd be okay with meeting his son?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

Her grin widened as she wrapped her arms around me.

"You're the best," she said, pulling my head down so she could kiss my cheek. "I'll see you at home later."

With that, I made my way home.

**

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading!

What did you think of the chapter? About what happened to Vinny? And Logan's reaction? What about Spencer and Marina visiting Vinny in the hospital and his reaction? And Carson and Vinny's alone time?

Let me know!

10

Carson Hughes

My lips were tightly pressed together as I dragged my feet over to my friends on Monday morning. The tension in my body was not about my group of friends, but about the football player who had joined them this morning.

Sitting extremely close to Hadley was Darren Sanderson. Otherwise known as the second biggest asshole on the football team. Definitely not someone I was happy to see sitting with my friends.

My eyes immediately darted to Logan to see that my best friend was already looking at me with an annoyed expression, his jaw tight and his posture rigid. Hadley laughed obnoxiously loud at something Darren said just as I begrudgingly made my way to them.

Hadley giggled again before turning and nothing I had joined the group.

"Morning Carson!" she said in a cheery tone, Darren directing his smile toward me. The smile seemed harmless enough, but it felt sinister.

"Morning," I muttered, sitting down beside Logan and sharing another look with him before sending a tight lipped smile Darren's way.

"What's goin' on, Carson?" Darren asked in a smooth, friendly tone. I wasn't one to brush people off, but I was not about to make friendly conversation with someone I knew wasn't as good a guy as he was trying to let on.

I just shrugged, sticking my hands in my pockets. Hadley sent me a look of distress, and even though I didn't want it to, it made me feel guilty.

"Not much. What's going on with you?" I asked to appease my friend who then sent me a grateful look.

"Not a lot," Darren replied. "Thinking about having a party this Friday after the game if you guys are interested."

I didn't say anything, and I didn't really have to. Hadley immediately agreed to Darren's offer, Archie nodding along.

"Need an excuse to get drunk," Archie told him.

Darren laughed and nodded in agreement until something, or someone, behind us grabbed his attention. I followed his line of vision to see that Seth Powers was standing not too far from us with an unreadable expression on his face. It seemed as if he and Darren were having a silent conversation before Darren stood up.

"I gotta go," he said, mostly to Hadley. "Hopefully I'll see you guys at my place on Friday."

"I'll be there if there's booze," Archie told him.

Darren chuckled before placing a kiss on Hadley's blushing cheek and walking away with Seth.

"What the hell was that about Hads?" Logan instantly snapped once Darren was out of sight.

"Don't yell at me, Logan," Hadley replied with an eye roll. Logan's eyes looked as if they were going to pop out of his head.

"Something is seriously wrong with you if you're going out with him," Logan told her, earning a smack in the shoulder from his girlfriend.

I couldn't help but agree with him, but I wanted to stay out of it. Eventually Hadley would see that Darren was just like all the other football players. Until then, I'd just keep quiet.

"I'm cool with it if we get free alcohol out of it," Archie interjected with a shrug.

"For once, I agree with him," Isaac added.

"Okay, my love life isn't up for debate," Hadley said. "I don't need your approval."

"I'm just looking out for you Hads," Logan told her.

She shook her head but the conversation was dropped after that. The group dispersed when the last bell rang, leaving Isaac, Logan and I walking together.

"Can one of you grab any English work for Vinny?" Logan asked us.

"Sure, he's staying at home today?" I asked.

Logan just nodded.

"How's he doing by the way?" Isaac asked, surprising both Logan and I.

"He's fine," Logan said. "Apparently he's underweight, so the doctors gave him some diet he has to follow and he's kinda pissed about it but his head is all good. Mom kinda forced him to stay home."

I couldn't help but feel sympathy for Vinny, but part of me knew he would hate that. He didn't seem like the type that wanted anything from anyone.

Isaac and I parted ways with Logan as we entered our English class. I would be lying if I said the room didn't feel a little empty without the other boy beside me.

***

It shouldn't have surprised me to see Vinny sitting in the middle of the road smoking a cigarette as I drove down the street toward Logan's house, but it did. However, this time didn't scare me like the last time. I slowed to a stop beside him, putting my window down and sticking my head out to see him.

"What are you doing?" I asked as he turned a blew his smoke up at me, the cut on his head looking like it was starting to heal.

"Logan's not home," he responded, taking another drag from his cigarette.

"He's not?"

"He went to Dana's."

I slowly nodded, looking over at the house to see that the driveway was empty except for Vinny's car.

"Are you here alone?" I asked him, knowing his mother had said she was going to stay home with him today.

Vinny nodded. "Mom took Luna to her checkup."

He stubbed out the cigarette on the street and put it in the front pocket of his jeans before standing up and facing me.

"Can we go to your house?" he asked, though it sounded less like a question and more like he was telling me to take him to my house.

I was stunned that he even wanted to hang out with me, so I wordlessly nodded and put the car in park as he rounded it and slid into my passenger's seat. Vinny coughed into his elbow before shutting the door and leaning his head back on the headrest. I stared at him for a few moments, watching as he let out a shallow breath from his mouth, his pink lips parting slightly. He rested his arm on the center console while his other leaned against the door.

He stilled smelled of smoke, but it didn't bother me like I thought it would.

Vinny's eyes shifted to me, narrowing as he looked at my face.

"Is there a reason why you're staring at me?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

An awkward laugh escaped from my mouth as I turned away, facing the road and putting the car back into drive to turn around out of the neighborhood. I could still feel Vinny's scrutinizing gaze heating up the side of my face as I drove toward my house.

"You do that a lot," he said after a few moments of silence.

"Do what?" I wondered, glancing over at him briefly before returning my eyes to the road.

"Stare at me."

I laughed again. "Sorry."

Vinny just shrugged and turned his gaze out the passenger's side window.

The rest of the ride lasted with comfortable silence, the only sound being the low music on the radio and the tires moving across the pavement.

Once we arrived at my house, Vinny followed me out of the car and up toward the door. He stood behind me, looking around as I unlocked the front door to let us inside.

"I don't even remember the last time you were here," I told him in a light tone as we walked inside.

Vinny just shrugged, standing in the doorway.

"Probably my twelfth birthday party or something," I said, trying to remember.

My friends didn't come to my house often. We always went to Logan's. But the last time I remember having a lot of people over was my twelfth birthday party. It was the last real birthday party I had, and the last one with my dad around.

I motioned for Vinny to follow me into the living room to which he complied, shutting the front door behind him. I took a seat on the couch and looked to Vinny as he stood in the doorway of the living room.

"You can come sit, you know," I said in a teasing tone, a smile on my face as I reached forward to grab the remote from the coffee table.

Vinny hesitated for a moment before letting out a shallow breath and scurrying over to the loveseat on the other side of the couch. I tried not to let my disappointment show as he didn't sit beside me.

"Anything you wanna watch?" I asked him, looking as he rigidly sat in the center of the loveseat.

He shook his head before standing up. "I need to grab a smoke."

Vinny hurriedly left the room and out the front door. I saw him through the window as he stood on the front porch and lit a cigarette between his lips. I tried to focus on finding something to watch on the TV, but my eyes kept drifting back to Vinny.

I watched as he leaned forward, gripping the railing of the porch. His shoulders were tense as he let go of the railing with one hand and pulled the cigarette from his lips, smoke clouding above him. He continued the same routine for a few more minutes before leaving the porch to stub out the cigarette on the pavement, picking it up before he came back inside.

When I heard the front door open, my eyes darted back to the TV as I flipped through the channels and acted like this is what I had been doing the whole time.

"Where do you even get those?" I asked as Vinny sat back down on the loveseat.

"I know a guy," he vaguely answered in a raspy voice, letting out a small cough as he leaned back on the couch and crossed his arms over his chest.

I laughed at his answer, but didn't ask him anything else.

As I continued looking through the channels, Vinny bounced his leg up and down. It was a nervous habit I noticed him do in class before.

"Are you okay?" I asked him, stopping my search on the TV to face him.

Vinny was biting down on his bottom lip as he looked over at me with an unreadable expression. I thought he wasn't going to answer me after a long moment of silence and began to look back at the TV before he spoke up.

"I shouldn't have come here," he suddenly said.

I was taken back by his statement, studying Vinny's serious expression. He looked on-edge, his lips pressed together in a straight line as he braced his hands on the couch on either side of his legs. I could feel his discomfort from where I sat.

"Why do you say that?" I wondered in a light tone.

His eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn't let his face go into a full-on glare as he made eye contact with me. I considered that progress.

"I don't like being alone at home," he surprised me by saying. "But I don't like when my whole family is there keeping an eye on me either. And I don't like being here."

"What do you like?" I asked him, my tone light with amusement.

Vinny stared at me for a long moment. "I don't know."

Part of me wanted him to say that he liked hanging out with me, but that was only wishful thinking. I could admit to myself that I had an infatuation with Vinny, but I couldn't imagine saying that out loud. Or him sharing the same feeling.

"Don't you like to read?" I asked him with a thoughtful expression, muting the television.

Vinny shrugged. "I guess so."

"Wanna give me a summary of what you've read so far of *Beloved* ?" I asked with a grin. "I haven't even opened it."

Vinny snorted, his lips quirking up slightly, and for the first time since arriving here, he looked at ease.

"You want to talk about school?" he asked me, raising his eyebrows with a smirk gracing his lips.

I shrugged, my grin never leaving.

He playfully rolled his eyes and started summarizing what he had read so far. It probably would have benefited me to actually listen to what he was saying, but I couldn't keep myself from focusing on the way his plump lips moved as he spoke.

"Are you even listening to me?" he asked in an irritated voice, though his expression remained playful and his eyes seemed like they were shining as he looked over at me.

I laughed to mask my embarrassment, looking down at my lap before returning my gaze to him.

"I uh, I got distracted," I told him with a sheepish smile. "Sorry."

"Distracted by my face?" he countered.

"No! Just..." I stammered, not knowing what to say as he stared at me with an amused expression. "Just— I don't know. Just distracted."

Vinny chuckled, shaking his head at me as he smiled down at his lap. I couldn't help but feel a little bit of excitement at the fact that I had made him smile, especially after how uncomfortable he was when he first got here.

"I'm gonna have to go soon," Vinny told me after we watched TV for a little bit. I checked the time to see that it was almost five in the afternoon.

"You can stay for dinner if you want," I offered, holding back from crossing my fingers in hope that he'd say yes.

I liked being with Vinny, even if we didn't speak much. Being around him felt comfortable, more comfortable than I had felt since coming home.

"Can't," he replied. "My parents make me eat dinner at home."

"Oh." I looked away to hide my disappointment.

"Because apparently it only counts as eating if they watch me do it," Vinny added in a bitter tone, his eyes trained on the television.

I wanted to reason with him and tell him that they only wanted to make sure he was healthy but I knew those words would do little to console Vinny. Even after only being home for a couple of weeks, I could feel the tension in the family every time I stepped into their house. He didn't need me to tell him his parents' justifications that they surely had already told him.

"You're, like, the only person who doesn't look at me like I'm fucked up," Vinny told me, keeping his eyes directed anywhere but me as my eyes shot over to his face.

It was like he didn't mean to say it, it just slipped out.

"Well, I don't think you're fucked up," I replied, keeping my eyes on him and willing him to look my way.

He did eventually, his bottom lip caught between his teeth.

My eyes were trained on his face and before I could say anything, my mother walked into the house.

"Hi, Cars—" She stopped when she realized I wasn't alone, a friendly smile gracing her face when her eyes met Vinny's.

"Hi, Vinny. It's nice to see you," Mom said in a bubbly tone.

"You too," he quietly answered, a small smile on his face.

"Are you staying for dinner?" she asked him. "I'll make anything you like."

"No, that's alright," he said, standing from his spot on the couch. "I actually have to head home. Thank you though."

"Some other time?" she asked.

Vinny nodded. "Sure."

I greeted my mother, giving her a kiss on the cheek before I followed Vinny toward the front door. He turned to look at me when he noticed I was following him, standing in the open doorway.

"I can walk," he told me, causing my head to quirk to the side in confusion.

"It's way too far for you to walk," I said, reaching behind him to open the door wider. "I'll drive you. It's not a big deal."

Vinny looked like he was contemplating for a moment before turning around and walking out of the house without a word. His quick steps made me think he was headed for the sidewalk, but he slowed as he reached my car, opening up the passenger's door and sliding in before I had even stepped off my porch.

"It was cool hanging out with you," I told him after we spent a few minutes of our drive in silence. "We should do that more often."

Vinny scoffed, keeping his eyes trained out of the passenger's side window.

"I'm serious," I assured him when he didn't say anything.

"You don't have to act like we're friends just because I'm Logan's brother," Vinny replied in a slightly clipped tone.

I briefly glanced at him before turning my attention back to the road. He still looked out the window, his arms crossed over his chest.

"That's not what I'm doing," I said as we neared his house.

"Okay," he replied, in a tone that told me he wasn't convinced.

We reached the house soon after that and Vinny was up and out of my car before I could say anything else to him. He rushed inside the house and shut the door without sparing me a glance. I tried not to let the action hurt me, but I couldn't help but feel a pang in my heart.

I didn't know how long I sat there and stared at the front door. A quiet tap on my window pulled me out of my thoughts, and startled me as I jumped back at the noise. Logan stood outside the car, looking in at me with a confused expression as he motioned for me to roll down the window.

"What are you doing here? Are you coming in for dinner?" he asked me in confusion.

"No, I was dropping Vinny off," I replied, relaxing in my seat.

Logan's eyebrows lifted as if he was confused, yet slightly intrigued at what I had just told him.

"Since when do you and Vinny hang out?" he asked me.

"Since you go to Dana's without letting me know you won't be home and I come here to just him," I replied, causing Logan to widen his eyes.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry," he said. "I thought I told you."

I waved him off. "It's fine. It was kinda nice hanging out with Vinny anyway."

Logan nodded, giving me an unreadable expression.

"Well, did you wanna come in for dinner?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Mom got out at a normal time tonight so I'm going to spend some time with her."

I bid Logan goodbye and started back toward my house.

Mom was sitting on the couch when I got back home. She smiled as I stepped in the living room and motioned for me to sit beside her.

"So you and Vinny Taylor..." she said in a teasing tone after I sat down.

"What?" I asked, my eyes widening. "What are you talking about?"

"I felt like I walked in on a moment!" she said with a laugh, throwing her hands up. "Did I?"

I couldn't help but laugh at her words.

"No, definitely not," I assured her. "We were just hanging out."

"Hm..." Mom trailed, a teasing smile pulling at her lips.

" *Mom* ," I said, shaking my head at her. "Seriously."

"He's a handsome kid, you should go for it!" she encouraged.

"Have you forgotten that he's Logan's brother?" I asked her, raising my eyebrows.

She waved me off, shaking her head. "That doesn't mean anything."

"It *so* does," I argued.

Mom shook her head. "Not if you don't give it meaning."

I gave her a look and she dropped the subject. Even though I spent the rest of the night on the couch watching TV with my mom, I couldn't help but let my mind wonder to the time I spent with Vinny Taylor.

**

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter. What did you think of Vinny and Carson hanging out?

Also please check out this awesome cover made by the super talented [yankeesforever]

!!! also found at this link: https://sta.sh/01aad5uz3mhm

11

Carson Hughes

I didn't want to go to Darren Sanderson's party when Hadley suggested it, I really didn't. The thought of socializing with the likes of the football team left a disgusting taste in my mouth. But there I was, standing in the corner of the crowded living room with Logan and Isaac while the rest of our friends were off partying.

Logan, Isaac, and I stood up against the wall, each of us with a drink in our hands. None of us were enjoying this. My comfort level was on the floor, feeling like I was trapped up against this wall with the amount of people packed into the small living room.

The musty air flowing through the room along with the close proximity of sweaty bodies made it hard to not want to gag. The lights were dimmed with a multicolored light shining on the walls, going along to the beat of the music.

"I'm so fucking sick of this," Logan shouted over the music from between Isaac and me. "I'm going to find Dana."

With that he left us, pushing and dodging people to get through the room.

Not that I wanted Logan to leave, but it was nice to have a bit more space in the crowded room. Isaac sipped on his drink, staring off into space and looking about as thrilled as I must have. We stood there for a little while longer before Darren Sanderson made his way over to us.

"Come on guys!" he shouted, getting too close to my face for my liking. I could smell the alcohol on his breath, feeling like it burned my skin as he spoke. "Everyone is in the kitchen. We're doing shots!"

By "everyone" I sincerely hoped he just meant our friends, but of course that was just wishful thinking. Isaac and I shoved our way through the

crowd to follow Darren into the kitchen. All of our friends were there when we arrived, but unfortunately, so were some of the football guys. Including Seth who looked like he should have stopped drinking hours ago.

Seth couldn't even stand up straight, his eyes hazy and glazed over as he wobbled on his feet with a bottle in his hands. Darren made his way to his best friend and took the bottle from him, taking a long swig before passing it off to Hadley who did the same. Darren put his arm around Hadley's shoulders and she clung onto his waist like her life depended on it. He grabbed the bottle from her and started pouring shots with his free hand.

"I'm going to tell you guys what I told him!" Dana shouted at Isaac and me, pointing a finger back at Logan who seemed to have loosened up since he left us. "We *never* do this! Have a good night and stop being so miserable!"

Isaac and I shared apprehensive looks before he shrugged and took a shot off the table in front of us. Dana nudged his shoulder and motioned towards a girl in the corner of the room who was staring right at us.

"She thinks you're hot!" Dana told him. "Go talk to her!'

Isaac just shrugged again and took another shot, sending a smirk our way before heading over to the girl.

"I can find you a girl too," Dana said in my ear, resting her hand on my shoulder.

I shook my head. "No thanks. I don't need one."

"Have some fun!" she urged just as Archie stumbled over to us.

"Listen to her, man," Archie slurred, nearly spilling his drink on me as he leaned into my side. "Get drunk, make out with a hot girl, do something!"

The smell of alcohol on his breath caused me to recoil from his touch. Archie didn't seem to mind, using the table to lean on instead. The kitchen was a lot less crowded with the living room, but it still felt like it was too cramped in here. I felt like I needed to go outside to get some fresh air.

I maneuvered through the kitchen, pushing past bodies that were to stubborn to move on their own. By the time I got to the back door, someone was coming inside as I was going out. Once outside, I took a deep breath of relief as a cool breeze washed over me and cooled down my burning skin.

I took a seat on a porch swing situated up against the house and stretched my legs out in front of me. A group of people sat in a circle around a fire, smoke clouding above them. From here I could tell the smoke was not just from the fire as the group passed a joint around the circle.

It felt good to get a few moments of peace away from the chaos of the party. But that was all it was, a few moments.

Someone from the group stood from a lawn chair and started making their way over to the porch. Once she got closer, I recognized her as a girl, Alice, from my English class.

I sunk back in my seat, my shoulders rising in tension as she stumbled up the steps. I tried to make myself as small as possible to remain unnoticed by her, but even in her drunken haze, her eyes locked on me and a wide smile grew across her face.

"Carsonnnn!" Alice exclaimed, dragging out my name and throwing her hands up in the air as she made her way over to me.

Alice stumbled, grabbing onto the porch swing to gain her balance before plopping herself down beside me. She sat too close for my liking, the smells of smoke, weed, and alcohol wafting off of her.

"Hi, Alice," I replied with a small, two finger wave.

She leaned into me, placing her hand on my chest with her face too close to mine.

"Are you having fun?" Alice asked with a giggle, her hand moving on my chest.

I tried leaning away from her but I was trapped. The swing was not spacious enough for me to put distance between us.

"I guess," I replied, awkwardly clearing my throat.

"I could make you have *a lot* of fun," she slurred in a low voice, her lips touching my ear as she spoke.

With that I stood, Alice sitting up and giving me a strange look.

"Sorry, gotta go," I rushed out. "See you later, Alice."

I didn't wait for her response before heading back into the house and finding my way to the kitchen where my friends still stood. The only one that was gone was Isaac, and I could only assume he went somewhere more private with the girl he was talking to earlier.

"Where did you head off to man?" Archie asked as soon as he saw me, throwing his arm around my shoulder and leaning most of his weight onto me.

"Get off, Arch," I said, shoving him lightly.

"You need to loosen up," he told me with a pointed look before motioning for Darren. "Darren, come give Carson some drinks. He's being moody."

Darren strode over to us with an easy smile, holding out two bottles.

"Pick your poison," he said.

I looked over at Logan, who was now clearly drunk, and then looked back to Darren and took a bottle from his hands. I didn't want to be the only one left bored out of my mind. It was a lot worse when I didn't have Logan to complain with me.

Darren and Archie cheered as I opened the bottle and took a long sip.

***

My head was heavy and my vision blurry as I looked through Logan's phone with his head on my shoulder. The five of us sat outside Darren's house, Hadley insisting on staying with Darren while the rest of us were drunk out of our minds.

The others were too far gone and that left me trying to find us a way out of here. I fumbled with the phone in my hand, barely able to make out the words on the screen as I clicked on someone to call. I brought the phone to my ear, accidentally smacking my head with it as I did so.

"You better have a good fucking reason for calling me at three in the morning," Vinny's tired voice snapped as he answered the phone.

"Hi, uh hi," I stammered, momentarily forgetting what I called him for. "I think there is a good reason."

"Carson?"

"That is me," I replied with a laugh, staring up at the star-filled sky.

"Are you drunk?"

"I think that is the good reason," I told him. "I dunno where the car is or what it looks like or—"

"Stop talking," Vinny snapped. "Where is Logan?"

"On my shoulder," I answered.

Vinny let out a sigh and I could hear rustling on the line like he was getting up from bed.

"Where the hell are you guys?" he asked.

"Darren's house."

Vinny didn't answer for a moment. I almost thought he hung up until he let out another heavy sigh.

"I'm guessing you need me to pick you up," he said, his voice slightly muffled.

"Hm, yeah," I replied with a yawn. "I can't drive like this and the rest are worse."

"At least you're not an idiot."

I chuckled at that, feeling my face heat up. "That is nice of you to say."

Vinny said something under his breath that I couldn't quite decipher. Maybe I could have if I wasn't in this state.

"I'm on my way," Vinny said in a harsh tone. "Don't move."

"I will not move," I said with a giggle, trying to keep myself as still as possible.

I didn't know how long I waited there as I continued staring up at the sky. Staring up at the stars reminded me of when I sat under them with Vinny, and the thought brought a blush to my cheeks.

I continued staring upwards until a hand was placed on my shoulder that was not currently being used as Logan's pillow. The touch startled me, but when I looked at who the hand belonged to, I instantly relaxed. Vinny looked down at me with a pointed expression, his eyes narrowed and his lips in a thin line.

"You're here!" I exclaimed. "I'm glad. I need you to get Logan off of me."

Vinny looked at his sleeping brother then looked at the rest of my friends who looked like they were dosing off.

"I need you to help me get all of them in the car," Vinny told me, walking to my other side to pull Logan up.

I knew I wouldn't be much help to him in this state, but still, I went on Logan's other side to help Vinny drag him to the car and did the same with

the others. Vinny didn't complain even though he was doing most of the work.

Once we got everyone in the car, I brought myself to the passenger's seat while Vinny waited for me in the driver's. He looked a little annoyed and I couldn't help but think the expression he wore was adorable.

"Aren't you gonna put your seatbelt on, Vinvin?" I asked him as I clicked my seatbelt into place.

He glared at me and let out a heavy sigh before putting his own seatbelt on.

"I like that name, Vinvin," I told him with a laugh.

"Stop calling me that."

"It's cute!" I defended. "Like you."

Vinny's eyes nearly shot out of his head as he looked over at me, slamming on the brakes.

"What did you just say?" he asked.

"I said it's cute like you," I repeated in a tone as if I was stating the obvious.

Vinny's jaw tensed as he shook his head, setting the car in motion once again.

"Don't say that," he muttered, his hands tightening around the steering wheel.

"Why? I think you're really cute," I told him, leaning my head back on the head rest but turning so I could face him.

Vinny's cheeks were turning red and I couldn't tell if it was from embarrassment or anger.

"Carson, shut the fuck up," Vinny hissed.

"Why? Am I making you uncomfortable? I'm sorry."

"No, it's just—" Vinny paused to curse under his breath. "You wouldn't say that to me sober. So don't say it now."

"I would if I was brave enough."

I watched Vinny as he drove, his jaw tight and tense as he seemed to be trying his hardest to ignore what I had just said. He was right saying that I would never have told him that sober, but my drunken state was allowing words to slip out of my mouth.

"I'm sorry I called you cute," I told him after the two of us sat in silence for a few moments, jutting out my bottom lip in a pout.

Vinny sighed, keeping his eyes focused straight ahead. "I don't care, Carson. Just stop talking."

"I just really do think you're cute," I continued. "And it feels good to tell you that. I never get to tell anyone that."

"You never get to tell anyone that I'm cute?"

I laughed. "No. I never get to tell anyone I think *anyone* is cute because nobody knows I'm gay."

Vinny slammed on the brakes again. "Carson! Shut up!"

"I'm sorryyyy," I said in a whiny tone. "It just feels nice to say that."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you were sober," Vinny said as we started moving again.

"Then maybe I should never be sober," I replied and Vinny just glared at me out of the corner of his eyes.

I kept quiet for the rest of the ride home, mostly because if I even sounded like I was about to say something Vinny would scowl at me and I would close my mouth. When we made it back to the Taylor's house, Vinny

instructed me to help him bring everyone inside through the basement so we wouldn't wake their parents.

Like getting them in the car, I wasn't much help getting them out. Vinny seemed as though he wanted to stay as far away from me as possible, his feet scurrying quickly as he dragged Logan's barely conscious body beside him.

Once we got everyone inside, Vinny turned to go up the stairs without saying a word. I stumbled over to him and latched onto his arm.

"Vinny," I said in a quiet voice to be sure I wouldn't wake the others. "I'm sorry I annoyed you."

"Let's just forget we spoke at all tonight," Vinny replied, not meeting my gaze. He shook his arm out of my grip but he didn't move.

"Will you stay down here?" I asked with a pleading look.

Vinny sighed, placing his hands on his hips before moving past me to sit on the couch. I quickly followed him, sitting by his side. We sat in silence as I stared at the side of his face. He was right; I did stare at him a lot. But I couldn't help it. I was captivated by him.

If he could feel my stare, he didn't show it. Vinny faced forward, seemingly ignoring me. His sharp features clouded my thoughts and I couldn't even think before I did what I did next.

I leaned in, intending to give Vinny a kiss on the cheek to show him my gratitude for what he had done for me and the others tonight. At the last second before my lips reached his face, Vinny turned his head to give me a strange look.

"What are you—" He was cut off by my lips reaching his.

Our lips only touched for a brief moment before Vinny was standing up and rushing out of the basement, leaving me and my lips burning at the spot.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!!

What did you think of the chapter? The party? Drunk Carson? What about him coming out to Vinny? And kissing him?

Just to let you all know, my finals are starting this week into next week so there probably won't be an update next week.

Thanks!

12

Carson Hughes

Most people have the luxury of forgetting the embarrassing things they had done while drunk. There was one time Archie stripped in front of everyone at a party and got up on a table to sing loudly and off key to whatever song was playing. The next day, he had no idea what he had done.

I, unfortunately, was not one of those people.

I woke up with a pounding headache, every throb banging against my skull being a painful reminder of everything I had done last night, the worst of all being kissing Vinny. I was slightly unnerved at the fact that I had come out to him before any of my friends, but that was nothing compared to the mortification I felt that I had made a move on him.

My hand held my head as I sat up on the couch, my tired eyes squinting as the sun peaked through the windows. It hurt to even try opening my eyes further.

Through squinted eyes, I looked around the room to see that Archie and Isaac were still asleep on the floor, but Logan and Dana were nowhere to be found.

It took all my energy, but I stood up from the couch and made my way up the basement stairs to find Logan and Dana in the kitchen, Logan standing in front of the stove while Dana sat at the counter on a stool.

"Morning," I muttered, sitting down beside Dana, resting my elbow on the table and putting my head in my hand.

Logan turned to look at me from where he stood at the stove while Dana sent a silent wave my way.

"You look brutal," Logan commented before turning back to the stove.

It was evident that he wasn't feeling much of a hangover, but I thought mine had more to do with the memories surfacing in my brain than the alcohol that I drank.

"He said the same to me this morning," Dana told me with a hard glance. She had her hair up in a bun, strands falling out at the sides.

"I said *we* look brutal," Logan defended, turning around again. "I literally woke up with your hair in my mouth."

I looked down at my hands as the two bickered. I couldn't look up at Logan without feeling a sense of dread at the thought of him finding out I had kissed his brother last night. It took all my willpower not to look around in search for Vinny, not that I thought he would want to see me after last night anyway.

"Carson?" Dana's voice called out, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Hm?" I hummed.

"We just asked if you knew how we got home last night," Dana clarified. "Logan's car isn't here so we obviously didn't drive."

"Oh, um," I started, clearing my throat and sitting up a little straighter. "I called Vinny to come get us."

"You did?" Logan wondered in shock. "And he actually came?"

I nodded. "Yeah, he did."

"Well good thing I decided to be a good brother this morning and make him breakfast," Logan said, gesturing toward the eggs he was cooking on the stove.

"You're making him breakfast?"

Logan nodded and sheepishly smiled. "I've been trying to go along with his diet with him so he'd actually do it."

Just as he finished his sentence, Vinny entered the kitchen with his eyes down, Luna following him closely. There was no indication of it, but it felt like he was just trying to keep his eyes away from me.

"Hey, thanks for getting us last night," Logan said when he saw his brother.

Vinny just shrugged, leading Luna to the sliding door and out to the back yard.

My throat closed up as I thought of what I would say to him when I had the chance. He likely hated me after last night, and I couldn't blame him.

When Vinny came back in the kitchen with Luna, Logan stopped him from sneaking back into his room.

"I made you breakfast," he told his brother, gesturing toward the plate he had just made. "Think of it as a thank you for last night."

"I don't want to eat your burnt ass eggs," Vinny replied with his seemingly permanent scowl.

"They're better this time, I swear," Logan assured him.

Vinny still didn't look convinced and he made no indication that he planned on eating what Logan had made him.

"You know Mom and Dad are going to ask me if you ate breakfast," Logan added with a sigh. "And for your own well-being, I can't lie to them about it."

Vinny's eyes moved to mine for a moment, but he looked away so quick it had me wondering if I had just imagined it. Without a word, he took the food from Logan and sat down at the kitchen table behind us.

I was suddenly conscious about the way I looked this morning. I didn't want Vinny seeing me look like a mess, though I knew I had been quite the mess last night.

"Hadley's texting me about hooking up with Darren last night," Dana said with a snort as he looked down at her phone.

Logan scoffed. "What the hell is wrong with her? Seriously?"

Dana just shrugged as her thumbs moved quickly across her phone screen.

"She hooked up with him?" I found myself asking, my voice hoarse.

"Pretty sure that was the plan all along," Dana replied with a nod, looking up at me.

"I don't get what she sees in him," Logan added, leaning against the counter.

"I don't even try to understand Hadley's taste in men," Dana told him in a bored tone. "She'll have her fun with him and be done."

I snuck a look back at Vinny as he was eating his breakfast. He had a disgusted look plastered on his face as he stared down at his plate, slowly chewing whatever he had just put in his mouth.

"I just don't want her to start bringing him around here," Logan continued, bringing my attention back to him.

"I doubt she will," I assured him, clearing my throat. "She knows we don't like him, I don't think she'll push it."

Dana hummed in agreement, taking a long sip of her coffee.

Logan finished making breakfast for the rest of us and placed plates in front of Dana and me. With the first bite, I could tell what Vinny meant about Logan's eggs, but I choked them down anyway.

"Okay, maybe these aren't much better," Logan admitted with his mouth full of eggs.

"I told you," Vinny said as he passed by him to put his plate in the dishwasher. "Fucking gross."

"You ate them though."

"Against my will."

And with that Vinny was out of the kitchen and back up the stairs.

***

Vinny had been avoiding me all week. He specifically sat away from Isaac and I in English class, getting there early just so he could find a spot as far away from us as possible. Whenever I had gone over to the Taylor's in the afternoons, he had hidden up in his room and only came out for dinner before hiding away once he was done.

I made up excuses to Logan as to why I couldn't go to his house for the rest of the week. I hated making Vinny uncomfortable in his own home.

But I could only deal with that for so long.

Friday afternoon Logan was going to Dana's before all our friends met up for the night. That would be my only chance to talk to Vinny alone and apologize.

I tried not to let my nerves stop me from walking in the house. My hand moved to turn the doorknob, but it wouldn't budge, so I walked around to the back.

Vinny was out in the backyard with Luna, tossing a frisbee for her when I rounded the house. She sprinted across the yard and caught the frisbee in mid-air before running back to Vinny. When I moved forward, Luna noticed me and came running over, causing Vinny to whip around to see who had come into his yard.

I pet Luna as she excitedly wagged her tail before me, but my eyes stayed on Vinny.

His cheeks were slightly flushed and his dark hair fell messily over his forehead as he directed his gaze anywhere but me. I moved toward him, Luna following closely behind me.

"Hi," I said, stopping in front of him.

I didn't know where to start with what I wanted to say to him. My mind was pulling me in different directions, causing a pain in my head I hadn't felt until just then.

"What are you doing here, Carson?" Vinny asked, still keeping his eyes away from me as he threw the frisbee for Luna once again.

"I was hoping we could talk," I told him.

"Talk about what?"

Even in this awkward situation, I couldn't keep myself from chuckling at him which he didn't appreciate, his annoyance evident by the look on his face.

"You know what," I said, keeping my tone light despite the nerves I felt. "About the other night—"

"We don't need to talk about it," he cut me off in a rushed voice.

"Well, I'd like to apologize to you," I continued, causing him to look at me briefly before turning his attention back to Luna who was offering him her frisbee.

He threw the disc again.

"You don't need to apologize," Vinny muttered, letting out a sigh.

"Yes, I do," I assured him. "I'm sorry for putting you in an uncomfortable position because I couldn't keep my mouth shut. And for kissing you."

Vinny kept his gaze forward and his expression impassive, not offering any response to my words.

"Vinny," I said softly.

"What do you want me to say, Carson?" he asked in a strained tone, snapping his gaze to me. "I already told you, you didn't need to apologize. We can just forget it."

The problem with that was I couldn't forget it even if I wanted to, and I didn't.

"Alright," I sighed, turning to walk away.

I allowed myself to face him again, despite my better judgment, and noticed him watching me as I left. He didn't turn away when I caught him looking, and I couldn't decipher the meaning of his expression.

Before I could stop myself, I was walking back toward him.

"Actually, not alright," I said in a firm tone as I stood in front of him, though I was shaking on the inside.

He raised an eyebrow at me but didn't say anything. Luna had preoccupied herself with a stick she found in the yard, so she wasn't there to break the tension anymore.

"I feel really bad about kissing you," I continued, letting out a deep breath. "It wasn't okay of me, drunk or not."

Vinny shrugged. "I'm not going to lose sleep over it, Carson. I'm more offended by the horrendous nickname you gave me."

Right. *Vinvin.* I nearly cringed at the thought.

He must have noticed the uncomfortable look on my face because he rolled his eyes at me and let out a frustrated sigh.

"Look, Carson, you don't need to feel bad or anything," he assured me. "Thirteen year-old me is pissing his pants at the fact that you kissed me."

I gave him a strange look, raising my eyebrows in shock.

"Really?" I asked in disbelief.

Vinny scoffed. "If you didn't notice that I've had a crush on you since puberty, that's on you."

I was taken back by his words. It felt like a heavy blow landed on my chest, leaving me winded and my words lodged in my throat blocking my airway.

"What?" I choked out.

"You heard me," he replied in a snarky tone.

"But how?" I asked, still feeling the initial shock.

Vinny looked at me with a squinted expression.

"What do you mean how?" he snapped. "I hit puberty, realized I liked boys and you were Logan's hottest and nicest friend."

Even him putting it in such simple terms did little to help me understand the situation. From what I could remember, Vinny had never made any indication that he had a crush on me. Not recently and especially not within the last four years of our lives.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked him after a few moments of silence between us.

He scoffed and shook his head at me. "I didn't know you were gay until you blabbed about it in the car."

The memory caused an embarrassed tint in my cheeks.

"Do you still?" I mumbled, not letting my gaze leave his no matter how nervous I felt.

"Hm?"

"Do you still have a crush on me?"

Vinny was silent for a moment, a contemplative look on his face. My heart was racing as I waited for his answer.

"It doesn't matter," he finally said. "Even if I did, it doesn't matter."

"Why doesn't it matter?"

He sighed, running his hand through his hair. He brought his shaking hand back down to his side and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, sticking one in his mouth and lighting it. Vinny inhaled and let out a cloud of smoke before continuing.

"Because it's not like anything could happen with us," Vinny said, taking another drag. "I can't date you or fuck you and you shouldn't want me to."

He was being blunt but I couldn't let that surprise me.

"What do you mean I shouldn't want you?" I asked him with a little urgency.

Vinny slowly looked at me, smoke clouding around him as he let out a breath. He raised his eyebrows in an irritated expression, looking at me like he thought I was stupid.

"I have issues, Carson, if you couldn't fucking tell," he said in a raspy voice. "And you're pretty much fucking perfect."

I shook my head. "I'm not perfect," I denied.

"Close to it, whatever," he said, letting out a cough into his elbow. "That's why we should just forget about this. I don't want you getting feelings for me or anything because I don't think it would end well."

It was a little too late for that. I didn't let my disappointment show as I slowly nodded at him.

"Alright," I said. "We can just forget it."

"Good," he replied as he finished off his cigarette.

"And Vinny," I quickly continued. "I'm not— Nobody knows—"

"You're not out yet," Vinny finished for me. "I know that. I'm not going to say anything."

I gave him a thankful smile and nodded. "Thank you."

With that I turned and left the yard, keeping my eyes forward to not look back at Vinny. The more often I thought about him, or looked at him, the harder it would be for me to forget anything had happened between us.

He made the task seem easy, but I wasn't so convinced.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for being patient with me while I work on my finals. I found some time between finals to get some writing done so here's that.

What did you think about the chapter? Were you surprised Carson remembered everything? Shocked? Happy? What about his conversation with Vinny? And finding out that Vinny has a crush on them. What do you think about their agreement to forget about it? Do you think they'll be able to?

Thanks for reading!

13

Carson Hughes

It hadn't crossed my mind when I had went to see Vinny that I was supposed to have dinner with my mom, her boyfriend, and his son that night. Now that I had spoken to Vinny, he was all I could think about, and I knew I wouldn't be able to get him off my mind during dinner.

"They're going to be here any minute, Carson!" Mom exclaimed, rushing around the kitchen with an apron tied tightly around her waist.

"Mom, it's fine," I assured her as I set the kitchen table. "Everything smells amazing and I doubt he'd leave you if it turns out you're a bad cook."

She narrowed her eyes at me and playfully swatted me with a dish towel. I couldn't help but be amused at her nerves. She was always so confident about everything she did, so it was funny to see her worked up over her boyfriend.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous!" she admitted, pulling at her hair. "It's going to be fine!"

"You're right, it is," I agreed with a smile.

All of this running around the kitchen, making sure everything was spotless should have taken my mind off my earlier conversation with Vinny. But my mind had other plans as it always did. I overthought about it and over-analyzed his words like I was trying to find meaning that wasn't there.

I told him we could forget, but I was already having a hard time thinking of anything other than him.

"Are you alright?" Mom asked, pulling me out of my thoughts. "You seem distracted."

I hadn't realized I had zoned out, staring down at the table where I set a plate in front of me. I mustered up a smile and turned to face her.

"I'm fine," I assured her. "Just zoned out for a second."

Before she could reply, the doorbell rang and Mom dashed off toward the door, tearing off her apron and throwing it back at me. I playfully shook my head at her and hung it up in its rightful place before quickly finishing setting the table. I heard Mom greet our guests from down the hall and their footsteps tapped against the floor as they made their way toward me.

I let out a deep breath, trying to let all thoughts of Vinny out with it, before putting on a smile and standing up straight.

My breath hitched slightly when I saw who entered the kitchen behind my mother. Standing next to a man about my mother's age was Spencer, his hands in his jeans pockets and in a rigid stance. I didn't know why it had never occurred to me that Paul's son would end up being someone I knew.

"This is my son Carson," Mom said with a wide smile, gesturing toward me. "Carson this is Paul and his son Spencer."

Spencer's eyes widened like he had just realized I was standing before him.

"Nice to meet you Paul," I said, stretching out my hand to shake his.

"I'm glad to finally meet you!" he replied in a cheerful tone. "Cass talks about you all the time."

"Hopefully good things," I joked with an awkward laugh.

"Of course!" Paul assured me before gesturing toward his son. "I think you and Spencer are around the same age."

I nodded, clearing my throat. "Yeah, we go to school together."

"You do?" Mom asked. "That's great!"

Spencer and I just nodded, him sending my mother a small, close-lipped smile.

Mom took Paul toward the stove and the two started discussing the meal, looking in through the oven. I didn't even bother paying attention to that.

Spencer and I awkwardly stood in front of one another. It wasn't as if the two of us had any bad blood, but it was slightly uncomfortable to find out one of your parents is dating the parent of somebody else you knew.

"How's it going, Spencer?" I asked, trying to ease a bit of the tension.

"Alright," he softly replied. "Did you know that our parents were dating?"

I chuckled. "I knew of Paul. Had no idea he was your dad."

Spencer nodded but didn't say anything.

"Do you want to sit?" I asked him, gesturing toward the kitchen table.

We sat across from each other at the table as we waited for the two in the kitchen to join us.

It was just my luck that Paul's son ended up being Spencer, Vinny's ex-best friend, because now my thoughts were back where I didn't want them to be.

"How's yearbook going?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"Pretty good," Spencer replied with a casual shrug. "A lot of work but there's only going to be more toward the end of the year."

There was a beat of silence before Spencer spoke again.

"How's, uh, how's Vinny doing? Since the hospital?" Spencer stammered, drumming his fingers on the table in front of him.

"Good, I think," I rushed out, feeling my throat dry a bit at the mention of his name. "I haven't really seen him much this week."

"I texted Logan a couple days ago and he said he was doing alright," Spencer continued. "I didn't know if he was just saying that though."

Spencer seemed more at ease than he had when he first arrived. His calm demeanor relaxed me even though we were on the subject of Vinny.

"He seems like he's doing well," I assured him, sending him a reassuring smile.

Spencer nodded at me, grinning slightly, just before Mom and Paul came into the dining area with the food.

"So you boys go to the same school?" Paul asked after we had all settled in and started eating dinner. "Do you have any classes together?"

I shook my head. "We have in the past but not this year."

"Carson's friends with Logan, Vinny's brother," Spencer told his father, who then had a look of realization on his face.

"Oh!" he said. "Those Taylors are good kids."

"So you're friends with Vinny then Spencer?" Mom asked with a kind smile.

I wished I could have told her before hand that it was a sore subject, but it didn't seem to matter. Spencer took it in stride and smiled back at her.

"Yeah, we've been friends for a while," Spencer replied. "Since we moved here.

Dinner went smoothly for the rest of the night. Paul was a good guy, and he was good at making Mom laugh which I appreciated. He even stayed after dinner to help her clean up the kitchen and put things away. I could see why the two liked each other so much.

"So your mom's really cool," Spencer spoke up as the two of us sat alone in the living room.

"Yeah, so's your dad," I replied with a smile.

Spencer nodded and looked down at his lap.

"We don't have to tell anyone about this if you don't want to," Spencer said, still looking away from me.

I was taken back by his words. Confusion swirled in my head as I tried to grasp his reasoning.

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked, cocking my head to the side.

"By anyone, I mostly mean Vinny," he admitted, looking up at me. "You two seemed to be on kinda good terms at the hospital. If he knew about this, it could ruin it."

I found myself nodding in agreement, though I couldn't pinpoint exactly why.

Something had happened where Vinny was at odds with Spencer, and even though I was supposed to be forgetting anything happened between us, I still didn't want to put the nail in the coffin.

***

Vinny Taylor

There was no day of the week other than Monday that my head felt as if it was filled with cement when I woke up. My head was heavy and aching, and it took all my strength to lift it from the pillow.

Smoke filled my lungs as I sat on the window sill with a cigarette between my lips, letting out a small cough after the inhale. I stared out at the sky and the sun resting over the trees. My door creaked and I didn't have to turn around to know it was Logan standing behind me.

"You gotta quit doing that," Logan said, shutting the door and making his way over to the window. "Dad acts like he doesn't know you do it just so Mom won't find out."

I didn't say anything. I wasn't in the mood, especially not first thing in the morning.

Logan was never happy with me or anything I did, so it was no use to waste my energy. I could feel Logan standing behind me as he waited for me to finish my cigarette. Once I was done, I stubbed it out and put it in my ash tray before turning to face him with raised eyebrows.

"I think you should sit with us at lunch from now on," Logan said as the two of us stood in front of each other.

I scoffed, shaking my head and pushing past him to get to my dresser. I threw on a plain t-shirt before turning back to see that Logan hadn't left.

"I'm serious," Logan urged.

"I don't eat lunch in the cafeteria," I uttered, leaning back against my dresser.

"You don't eat lunch at all," Logan countered, raising his eyebrows at me as if daring me to argue with him.

That was the thing about the two of us; we were always butting heads. Both of us were too persistent and stubborn. It wasn't like I could actually eat lunch with Logan anyway, not with the people who would be sitting there. Not that he knew anything about that.

"Well, I packed us lunches from that pamphlet the doctor gave you," Logan added, turning to leave my room. "So it would be nice if you ate it."

Logan was shit at making food.

He left my room without another word, which I was glad for.

Logan always left for school before me so he could pick up Dana and that was one of the many reasons I was happy that we were lucky enough to have separate cars. Third wheeling with them was not something anyone should have to do.

By the time I made it downstairs, Logan had already left for school and Mom was already gone for work which left me home alone with my dad. It wouldn't be so bad to be left alone with Dad if he didn't refuse to take any of my bullshit.

"Made you breakfast," he said once I walked into the kitchen. I didn't even bother arguing with him as I sat across him at the kitchen table and started eating the meal he prepared for me.

Dad sipped on his coffee and watched me eat.

"You have to stare at me?" I asked in between bites.

"I can't look at my son?" he retorted, taking another sip of coffee.

I just shook my head and continued eating. We sat in silence for a while, which I preferred. It felt like my father analyzed every conversation we had.

I ended up running into school late like usual. First period hadn't started, but it was only minutes away. I didn't want to spend more time there than I had to, but that came with the challenges of finding a parking spot after everyone else had already arrived.

Once I found parking, I went straight to English and sat in the far back corner, away from where Carson and Isaac would be sitting. I buried my head into *Beloved* as students started walking into class.

When Carson walked in, it was almost like I could feel his presence. I didn't have to look up to know that he had walked in with Isaac, and the two of them sat in their usual seats. And I also didn't have to look to feel the brief moment that Carson's eyes were on me.

I couldn't bring myself to look back at him. If I did, he'd be on my mind all day.

***

The locker room was empty when I entered it at lunch time. There was no gym class the period before, so this end of the school was pretty much

deserted around this time.

I sat on the cold, wooden bench in front of the lockers and took out the bag of food Logan had stuffed into my backpack, eating it slowly. My lunches in the locker room always went uninterrupted until today.

Footsteps echoed through the room and I fought the urge to hide in one of the showers. Deep breaths did little to calm me, but it was all I could do. The echoes became louder the closer the footsteps came and when I saw who they belonged to, I wished I had hidden.

Seth's sinister, smirking face came into view and I instantly felt like I was backed into a corner.

"Get the fuck out of here," I said, tightly gripping the bench.

Seth stepped closer. "You're not so brave when it's just the two of us, huh?"

I didn't answer as I stood up from the bench and gathered my things, making sure not to turn my back on Seth.

"Admit it, Vinny," he hissed in a low voice. "You act all tough when we're around other people, but the minute we're alone you're a scared little kid."

"What are you even doing in here?" I spat, backing away from him. "How did you even find me?"

"You think I don't know that you eat lunch in here?" Seth laughed, moving forward as I backed up.

My back hit the lockers and Seth stood so close to me our chests were nearly touching. My breathing was uneven as my chest rose and fell. Seth's smirk became wider as he noticed the way he was affecting me.

"To answer your first question," he started, "I overheard Logan complaining to his little friend about Darren and me, especially me."

"So what?" I breathed out, mentally cursing myself for the way my voice shook.

"So I wanted to make sure you've kept up your end of the deal," Seth answered, his smirk falling as a dark look overtook his face.

"I haven't said shit," I told him. I felt my body shaking. Fists formed at my sides, but I knew I wouldn't use them if we were alone. Not unless I had to.

"I hope you're telling the truth for your sake," he replied, his face coming closer to mine. "Because I won't go easy on you if I find out you squealed."

"I haven't said shit," I repeated more urgently, my teeth chattering as my nerves grew.

Seth nodded. "Good. Because you don't have shit to say because nothing happened."

Right. Nothing happened. I just made it up in my head.

He backed off a little, but still kept me cornered. Seth's hard stare stayed on my face which caused my insides to shrivel. Being in such a small space with him almost made my heart stop. I felt like the walls closed in on us and we were stuck. I was going to throw up if he didn't back off.

"Back off," I breathed out, my voice quieter and shakier than before.

My back started sliding down the lockers as my knees gave out. Seth grabbed onto my arms to hold me up.

"Don't go passing out on me, Vinny," Seth said with a sigh. "You're so dramatic."

"Don't— Don't touch me!" I exclaimed, albeit weakly. I tried shaking myself out of his grasp but I felt as though I could barely move.

"Fine," he said, releasing my arms and letting me slide down to the floor. "Sit on the floor and have your little panic attack."

Seth turned on his heel and left the locker room and it felt like I could finally breath again once he was gone. I hugged my knees to my chest, allowing myself to take deep breaths as I rested my head back on the

lockers. Any appetite I had before was gone, replaced by overwhelming nausea.

**

Surprise update!

What did you think of the chapter? Were you surprised that Spencer ended up being the son of Carson's mom's boyfriend? I think I saw at least one person predict it. Any ideas about what went on with Vinny and Spencer? How did you like reading Vinny's POV? What do you think is up with him and Seth?

Thanks for reading!

14

Carson Hughes

Vinny sat with us at lunch on Tuesday.

It was a bit of a surprise and I stopped in my tracks when I first saw him at the table, Vinny staring angrily down at a meal Logan had made him. I let the shock subside and sat at my usual seat across from Logan and to the left of Isaac, with Vinny on his left and Dana on his right.

"Hey," I greeted, letting my eyes linger on Vinny for just a moment.

He kept his eyes down at his meal.

Hadley made her way to our table after stopping at Darren's for a moment. Everyone at our table, except Vinny, stared at her as she took her seat next to me.

"What?" she asked, placing her bag on the floor.

"Darren's not sitting here?" Logan asked, eyebrows raised.

Hadley shot him a dirty look. "He's not going to sit over here every day. I already told you that."

"And you two are not going to fight about this every day, so stop," Dana interjected Archie's loud voice sounded through the room before anyone could respond.

"Guys!" Archie exclaimed from across the cafeteria, barreling through a group of freshmen. He rushed over to the table, slamming his hands down on it when he arrived. Vinny flinched at that and sent a glare his way.

"What is your problem?" Dana asked him with an incredulous look.

Archie's excitement was practically dripping off of him as we all looked at him with wide-eyed stares. His smile was taking up his whole face as he took his phone out of his pocket and shoved it into Dana's face. She pulled away to get a better look.

"No fucking way," she said, shaking her head at him.

"What?" Logan asked, leaning closer to Dana to see the phone.

"Crystal and I are going out tonight!" Archie excitedly announced, taking a seat at the table.

"No shit?" Isaac asked with raised eyebrows, taking the phone from Archie to see for himself. "Wow."

"You actually got her to say yes?" Hadley wondered, a look of disbelief on her face.

Archie scoffed. "Yes. Is it that hard to believe? It's hard to resist this."

"Gross," Hadley replied.

I wasn't really all that interested in Archie's dating life, and I found it weird that Crystal would even be interested in dating someone who was still in high school. Archie was already eighteen, older than the rest of us, because he had started school late when we were younger. But still, the situation seemed strange.

"Why are you guys going out on a Tuesday night?" I asked, turning to face him.

"It's the only night she's not working," Archie replied, stuffing his face with his lunch.

Tuesday nights were usually my mom's late nights at the hospital, so it was a night I spent with my friends at Logan's.

"What are you guys doing tonight?" I asked Logan and Dana.

"Dinner with my parents," Dana replied in a bored tone.

I looked over to Hadley as if directing the question at her.

"Darren's," was all she said.

"Are *you* doing anything tonight?" I asked Isaac who just shook his head.

"Guess that leaves us having a date night," he joked, nudging my arm.

I looked over to Vinny who was still staring down at his meal. My mind itched to include him, but part of me knew he wouldn't want me to do that. Him being here was making it all that much harder to forget anything had happened between us.

The rest of lunch I did my best to ignore his presence, but he was always in the back of my mind.

***

"I haven't been here in a while," Isaac commented as the two of us walked into my house.

"Mom kinda hates when I bring people over because of the mess," I told him, gesturing toward the clothes folded over the back of the couch and the pile of mail on the coffee table.

She didn't actually *hate* when I brought people to the house. In fact, she loved seeing my friends. She just hated it when I didn't clean up first.

I tried to help Mom out with the cleaning as much as I could. She was insecure about our house not always being neat and tidy, but she worked so much it was hard to keep up with, and I was at school. It didn't matter as much if we didn't have people over.

Isaac shrugged. "It's not even bad in here. You should see my house. The kids make it impossible to keep clean."

Isaac's three younger siblings were only between the ages of four and seven. I could only imagine how difficult it was to keep that house in order.

"You want anything to drink?" I called out as I made my way into the kitchen, Isaac following me.

"Whatever you have," he said.

I opened the fridge and gestured for him to take something out, then grabbed a bag of chips and went back to the living room. The two of us sat on the couch together, Isaac looking through the TV channels while I folded the rest of the laundry.

Isaac glanced over at me as he settled on a channel.

"I'm glad we got to hang out, just the two of us," he said.

I nodded in agreement. It wasn't often that I got to spend time with my friends one on one. Most of the time it was all of us, or at least Logan and Dana. I didn't mind it, but it was a pleasant change for it to be just the two of us.

"I have something to tell you," Isaac continued, looking straight ahead as my head whipped around to face him.

"What?" I asked, placing the shirt I folded into the laundry basket.

"About the night of Darren's party," he said and my mind filled with dread.

It felt like the walls closed in on us and there was no way I could escape this conversation. My brain swelled with an ache, pushing painfully against my skull like it wanted to burst out.

"I saw you kiss Vinny," Isaac confessed in an even tone and my stomach felt like it dropped to my feet.

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?" I asked, diverting my gaze from him.

"I didn't know if I should," he said with a sigh. "At first I didn't know if I was just seeing things because I was so drunk, but it just felt too real to *not* have happened."

I snapped my eyes shut, putting my face in my hands and wishing to vanish in that moment.

"Hey," Isaac called out, moving closer to place his hand on my shoulder. "It's okay, Carson."

"It's embarrassing," I muttered, my voice muffled by my hands. "I was drunk and he rejected me."

"I mean, any decent person would reject a drunk person coming onto them," Isaac replied and I let out a groan.

"I wasn't *coming onto him* ," I said, pulling my hands away from my face to look at him. "And I— I didn't want anyone to know about that."

"About Vinny or about kissing a guy?"

"Both!"

"There's nothing wrong with either."

I shot him a look of disbelief.

"Don't give me that look," he said, narrowing his eyes at me.

I couldn't keep my eyes on him as he stared at me. The thought of Isaac not only knowing I had kissed Vinny, but *seeing* me do it, had me feeling all sorts of uncomfortable. I felt emotionally naked, everything in my mind and heart out for Isaac to see.

"Can we just forget it?" I asked him, finally turning my gaze back to his face. "Forget what you saw and I'll forget we talked about it."

"I mean, I guess," Isaac said with a shrug.

I nodded and diverted by gaze back to the television, my posture rigid as I sat beside Isaac on the couch. Even his nonchalance did nothing to ease my discomfort.

"But do you like him though?" Isaac asked and I had to pause my breathing for a moment.

"What?"

"Do you like Vinny?" he asked again. "Like you wanna date him? Or was it just a drunken, horniness thing?"

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," I said with a sigh.

Isaac didn't bother me about it the rest of the afternoon. We sat in a comfortable silence before there was knocking on my front door. I looked out the window from where I sat on the couch and noticed a car parked out front.

When I got up and opened the door, Vinny stood on the other side with his hands in his pockets and swaying back and forth on his heels.

"Vinny," I said, forcing a smile onto my face. "What are you doing here?"

His face was fixed in a frown, his wide eyes dark yet still pulling me in. His bottom lip was plump and swollen, probably from the time it spent between his teeth.

"Can I come in?" he asked, though it didn't sound like a question. His voice was raspy like he had just finished a cigarette, and from the smell of smoke coming from him, that seemed to be the case.

He stared expectantly at me as I stood, shocked before him.

"Yeah, of course!" I said after and awkward moment, stepping aside so he could come in the house. "Is everything alright?"

"No one's home. Don't want to be there," was all he said as we made our way to the living room.

Vinny stopped short, causing me to nearly bump into him, when he noticed Isaac sitting on the couch.

"I didn't know you had company," Vinny said in a low voice, making no move to completely enter the living room.

"Yeah, just Isaac," I said, confusion evident as I spoke. "Is that alright?"

Vinny didn't say anything for a moment as Isaac turned to look at us. Isaac stood from the couch and made his way over.

"I should head out," he said, patting me on the shoulder. "I'll see you later."

"Okay..." I trailed in confusion. "See you tomorrow."

Without another word, Isaac was gone.

Vinny let out a breath I hadn't even noticed he was holding and stepped forward into the room, taking a seat on the loveseat across the room.

"So is everything okay?" I asked him, taking back my seat on the couch.

He sat on the loveseat with his arms crossed over his chest, his face etched in a frown and his eyebrows knitted together.

Vinny shrugged. "No one's home."

"Isn't that a good thing?" I asked with a small smile.

He shrugged again, not meeting my gaze. "Sometimes."

We sat in silence for a few moments, but with him so close, and the two of us being alone, I couldn't hold my tongue for long.

"So, I've been thinking," I started, Vinny's eyes darting to me and his eyebrows raised in question. "I can't forget about what happened between us."

Vinny let out a long sigh, running his hand through his hair.

"Carson," he said in a low tone.

"I know," I stopped him. "I know how you feel about this."

"So why bring it up?"

I couldn't answer that. I didn't even know why myself.

"Because I can't get you off my mind at all," I surprised myself, and Vinny, by saying.

He let the initial shock from my words vanish from his face and looked at me with a blank stare. I couldn't even let myself be embarrassed because my words were the truth.

"So what do you want?" Vinny murmured, his voice small, only above a whisper.

You.

"I don't know," I admitted.

With seemingly no control over my body, I stood up and walked over to where Vinny sat and took the spot beside him. He tensed and watched as I lowered myself onto the loveseat. My eyes were trained on his face and his were on mine.

"I want to kiss you," I softly confessed, the words falling from my lips without warning.

Vinny took his bottom lip between his teeth, his eyes glancing down at my mouth as I let out a shallow breath.

"You can't," he said, looking up into my eyes. That was what made me snap out of my daze.

"I know, I'm sorry I even said it," I told him, looking away toward the TV.

My hands were in fists at my sides as I mentally cursed at myself. I wanted to disappear and let the couch swallow me whole to get me out of this situation. Vinny had made himself clear and I had made myself look like a fool.

I was about to stand up when Vinny placed his hand on my shaking knee. I hadn't even noticed my leg was bouncing until his touch stopped me.

My breath hitched in my throat as I looked into his contemplative gaze. Vinny looked at my mouth then back up to my eyes as if having a debate in his mind.

With a look of determination, Vinny turned and swung his leg over my hips to straddle my waist. His breathing was heavy as he brought his arms to the back of my neck and his face close to mine.

I didn't say anything and kept my hands at my sides, waiting for him to make his move. Vinny's lips parted as he let out one last deep breath before placing his mouth over mine. Once our lips touched, my hands traveled to his hips while his stayed on my neck.

He kissed me skillfully, like someone who had kissed a lot before, letting his tongue explore my mouth at a slow pace.

By the feeling of his lips on mine alone, it was enough for me to know he had me hooked.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading. I hope everyone had a great Christmas/holiday season for anything you celebrate!

What did you think of the chapter? Of Vinny sitting with the group at lunch? Isaac's confession? Vinny showing up at Carson's house? What do you think is going to happen after this second kiss? Let me know!

15

Vinny Taylor

I was pretty much the biggest idiot ever.

Going to Carson's house after I told him to forget about me was stupid. Getting on his lap and making out with him was even worse, but there I was.

My mouth continued moving against his, slowly and sensually. I put my hands on his and moved them up to my hair, allowing his fingers to tangle in the hair at the base of my neck.

Carson's lips were smooth against mine, parting and waiting for my next move. He let out a content sigh from the back of his throat which only pushed me to continue, no matter how stupid I knew I was being.

I brought my hand to the side of his face, caressing his defined jaw and holding him against me. His face was soft against my rough hands. His face in my hand fit like a puzzle, like this position was natural for the two of us. Our noses brushed against each other as we both tilted our heads in opposite directions to deepen the kiss. Carson pulled at my hair, causing me to let out a groan of pleasure.

With my eyes closed and my lips preoccupied with Carson's, it was like the rest of the world was at a standstill, and I could savor the moment without thinking about everything else surrounding us. This moment of blissful ignorance could only last so long, it once it was over, reality would come crashing back in like it always did.

I abruptly pulled my lips off of his, continuing to hold his face in my hand as I stared down at him. Carson's face was beautifully flushed, his cheeks pink and his eyes hazy with lust and desire. His lips were swollen, parted as if waiting for more.

Our heavy breathing matched, our chests rising and falling together. Carson's face leaned closer to mine as if absentmindedly trying to connect our lips again.

I almost gave in, but I couldn't.

I scrambled to get off of Carson, backing up as soon as I was on my feet. He seemed stunned for a moment, his hands staying in place where they once held me, before he stood up and walked toward me.

"Are you okay?" he asked, a look of concern overtaking his face.

I couldn't look at him.

"I have to go," I muttered, turning away from him and leaving toward the door. His quick steps on the hardwood floor told me he was following me.

"Vinny, wait," Carson urged, following me out the front door, though he didn't reach out to grab me and for that I was grateful.

When I got to my car, I finally turned to face him. The look of concern was now mixed with disappointment and my chest constricted at the sight. I didn't like that I had been the reason for that look on his face.

"Please wait," Carson said, his voice hopeful.

I pressed my lips together, biting the inside of my cheek. I was the biggest idiot to ever live. He wouldn't want to kiss me again if I kept running away every time. Maybe that was for the better. Maybe that would end us before we started.

With distance between us, I could calm myself down. I could look at his face, even if it hurt me to do it, and I could talk to him without feeling like my voice would be small.

"Carson, I can't," I said with a sigh, presenting a stoic expression. "That was a huge fucking mistake. A huge one."

His face fell and I felt a crack in my heart that I hoped didn't break my stony expression.

"Why?" he asked, his voice remaining strong despite the look he gave me. That was something I always appreciated about Carson; he was strong and bold, never backing down.

"We've already had this conversation," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

" *You* kissed *me* , Vinny," he argued, his eyebrows raised.

"I know, it's my fucking fault, okay?" I said, opening my car door.

"You're just going to leave?"

I gave him one last glance before getting in my car and driving away, leaving him standing on the sidewalk and watching as I drove out of sight.

My hand shook as I struggled to pull my pack of cigarettes out of my front pocket. When I finally got it, I placed one between my lips and lit it. I rolled the window down as I inhaled and then placed the cigarette between my fingers and exhaled.

I stopped shaking after a few more inhales and eventually finished the cigarette, stubbing it out and dropping it in my cupholder.

When I got home, I sat in the driveway for longer than I thought. It got dark out and I was startled by Logan tapping on my window. The look on his face was questioning, an eyebrow raised with his head tilted to the side. I got out of the car and he stepped aside.

"Were you going somewhere?" he asked me.

"No, I just got home," I lied, pushing past him to go up to the house.

"Where did you go?" he asked as he followed closely behind me,

"None of your business."

Logan said something under his breath as the two of us stepped inside, but I didn't listen closely enough to hear it. He was always saying something about me under his breath, so I just started to tune it out.

He followed me into the kitchen where I opened the fridge, finding the dinner Mom and Dad had left me. They usually liked to eat dinner with me to keep an eye on me, but they had told me beforehand that they weren't going to be home until later tonight.

I stuck the plate into the microwave and leaned against the counter with my arms crossed as it heated up.

"You don't have to watch me," I snapped as Logan took a seat at the dinner table. "I'm going to eat the fucking food."

I didn't want him down here, watching me as I ate. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts about what I had done with Carson without Logan being there to make be feel even more guilty about it.

"I know you are," Logan said, making no move to get up from his seat. "I'm not *watching* you, Vin. We used to hang out, why can't we now?"

I shook my head at him. "You know why."

He didn't actually know why, but I would rather let him believe that he did. It was easier that way for both of us.

"It's been months, Vin," Logan sighed, standing up from his seat at the table. "You can stop being embarrassed about it. I got over it."

I didn't reply as he walked out of the kitchen and left me alone.

***

Avoiding Carson in English class in the morning was easy. I could just sit at the back of the class and mainly go unnoticed. And if I kept my eyes off him, I could act like he wasn't even there.

It was more difficult in the locker room before gym class. Over the last week or so I had been changing in one of the stalls and rushing out of the room to make sure we wouldn't cross paths, but of course, Seth had to come into the picture and ruin that.

"Why are you running off, Vinny?" Seth asked, clasping his hand on my shoulder to stop me.

I shoved him off. "I'm not in the fucking mood right now, Seth."

I could feel Logan and Carson's eyes on me as Seth grabbed onto my shoulder again, holding it tighter this time. This was exactly what I didn't want. I wanted to remain unseen, but of course, that could only last so long.

"Seth," Carson called out, him and Logan making their way over to us. "Come on, just stop."

"I'm not doing anything," Seth replied in a casual tone, though his voice always sounded venomous to me.

I shook out of his grip and landed a heavy blow to his stomach with my elbow and walked away. Seth let out a groan and I knew he wouldn't forget about what I had just done. I couldn't let that bother me though.

Seth was right. When we were in front of others, I wasn't scared of him. If he really wanted to harm me, he'd get me alone, and he knew just how do to that.

"Why was he going after you?" Logan asked from behind me as I stood in front of a locker and pulled my shirt off to change.

"Because he's a fucking lunatic?" I answered, pulling my gym shirt over my head. "I don't fucking know."

I turned around to face my brother, using all my willpower to keep my eyes away from Carson. Carson was, once again, proving how much better he was than me just by being concerned for me after I had coldly rejected him.

It would be easier for me if he just hated me, but I didn't think he had a hateful bone in his body.

We left the locker room and waited for direction from Coach Bronson. I just wished that we wouldn't be playing some stupid game. I preferred running, in every sense of the word.

Running in class, running for sport, running from my problems. Running from Carson.

It was my only talent, really.

It was like whatever Gods there were heard my wishes when Coach Bronson sent us out to the track where I could run in solitude, which was how I preferred it.

Later on in the day, I stayed behind at school and ran through the cross country trails that I had once been familiar with. I had overheard Logan invite all his friends over the house for the afternoon, and there was no way I wanted to be in the same house as Carson after what I had done to him. I wished he would hate me, but I knew he wouldn't.

Today was the only day of the week I could use the trails because the cross country team had an away meet. Every other day, they'd be practicing here and I didn't want to face my old teammates.

The air was still warm as the end of September was nearing. It was humid and I could feel the moisture in my throat and in my lungs as I breathed. There was a slight breeze that did enough to cool me down as I ran.

It was like I never stopped using these paths. I knew where every turn was and every root from a tree sticking out from the dirt. I ran through it again and again, not even keeping track of how many times I finished the trail. The sun was leaving over the trees and my throat ached for water.

It wasn't until I got back to my car that I realized I had about a hundred missed calls from my family.

I rolled my eyes as I gulped down a whole water bottle. Logan didn't show up at home, and no one batted an eye. I didn't show up at home and they were blowing my phone up and ready to send a search party.

I dialled Dad as I started the car. The phone barely even rang before he picked up.

"Where the hell are you?" His voice was snapping and filled with anger. I glanced at the clock to see that it was almost seven in the evening. I hadn't noticed how long I had been running, my mind up in the clouds.

"I'm at school," I said. "I'm on my way home now."

"You can come home right away and explain to me why you weren't answering your phone for hours," Dad replied in a clipped tone.

I sighed. "I'll be home in ten minutes," I said before hanging up the phone and pulling out of the parking lot and lighting a cigarette.

I felt like I was constantly under a microscope, always watched, judged, and scrutinized. My parents didn't know what to do with me, so they resorted to being overprotective and intrusive. It was tiring for all of us.

I finished my cigarette before pulling in the driveway. Logan's friends' cars were still parked outside, including Carson's. Even with hours spent away from home, I had not been able to avoid him. Luckily, none of them were in sight when I entered the house. Only Mom, Dad, and Luna were watching the door as I opened it and walked in.

Luna immediately came up to me and I knelt down to scratch her head for a few moments before standing back up.

"I lost track of time," I muttered before my father could even say anything.

He had the look on his face like he was going to start yelling. His jaw was clenched and his eyes were narrowed in a disappointed glare. He had his arms crossed over his chest as he stood in front of me. Mom sat on the couch across the room, her lips pressed together in a thin line.

"You know that's not an excuse, Vincent," Dad said in a stern tone, though he kept his voice low. "You need to answer our calls. You know we want you home for dinner."

"Yeah," I sighed. "I know. I was just running the cross country trail."

Dad raised his eyebrows. "Are you rejoining the team?"

I shot him a look and let out a groan. "You know I can't just rejoin the team, Dad."

He pressed his lips together, but didn't say anything. It was an argument we had too many times. I hadn't joined cross country back when it started in August, and I couldn't join mid season. Although I was sure Coach Bronson would make an exception for me, I didn't want him to.

"Next time answer your phone or you will not have one anymore," Dad said, and that was all I needed to scurry off to my room after briefly greeting my mother.

I couldn't get to my room quick enough, wanting to avoid any chance of running into Carson downstairs. Knowing he was here was enough to put me on edge.

And I was too much of a coward to face him.

**

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading!!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! How did you enjoy a full chapter of Vinnys POV? Do you want to see more of that? What did you think about Vinny's reaction to kissing Carson? And how do you think Carson is feeling?

16

Carson Hughes

Rejection wasn't something I was used to. That was mostly because I never put myself out there to be rejected. Watching Vinny leave left an empty feeling in my chest and confusion in my head.

The next day when I saw my friends, they all knew something was off with me.

"Are you alright, bro?" Logan asked as he lounged on the couch with Dana under his arm.

We sat down in the basement like we usually did when Logan's parents were home. Archie was going on and on about his night with Crystal while I zoned out looking down at the carpet floors.

Just the thought of Vinny possibly being two floors above me made me feel hollow. His rejection stung more than I would like to admit. It felt like he pulled me in just to show me what I couldn't have. He made me think there was something just for it to vanish in an instant.

I looked up at Logan and mustered up a smile.

"Yeah, I'm good," I said, keeping my voice light to mask what I was really feeling.

I could feel Isaac's gaze on the side of my face, but I couldn't turn to look at him. He knew something had gone on with Vinny yesterday, and as soon as he got me alone, he would ask me about it.

"Guys, focus," Archie called out, gaining our attention. "I didn't even get to the best part about my date with Crystal and you're already not listening."

"Go ahead, Arch, tell us all about it," Hadley said in a bored tone, scrolling through her phone.

"I was just being my normal, charming self when I was driving her home," Archie continued, ignoring Hadley's tone. "And I walked her up to her door like a gentleman and she *kissed* me."

"That's it?" Isaac asked.

Archie pinched his face in an offended look. "What do you mean 'that's it?' She kissed me! Her lips on my lips!"

"That's pretty standard for a date," Dana added.

Archie started arguing with the group as I stood up from my spot next to Isaac.

"I'm gonna go use the bathroom," I said before ascending the basement steps.

I quietly made my way through the house, so not to be caught by Jeff or Val. However, Luna saw me and started following me, her nails clicking on the floor.

"Sh, Luna," I said, stopping to pet her. She sat down beside me for a moment, but when I started moving again, she was following.

I went up the steps and down the hall to Vinny's door. I couldn't stand the feeling of how we left thing. I needed to confront him and tell him exactly how I felt about everything. It would be easier if we were just upfront, if he could just flat out reject me instead of kissing me first.

I tapped on his door, but there was no answer, not that I expected one. There usually wasn't an answer.

Another tap on the door met with no answer.

I let myself in the room, poking my head in. The lights were off and when I flipped them on, I realized the room was empty. My chest deflated and I

tried not to let the feeling of disappointment consume me.

Luna went further into the room, sniffing around. I sighed and called her out, shutting the door when she came out into the hallway.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I was met with Isaac's knowing glance.

"What is going on with you?" he whispered, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I just wanted to talk to him," I muttered, looking around to make sure no one was listening in.

"He's not home," Isaac said. "Jeff just came down to ask Logan to call him."

"Yeah, I figured that out."

"Do you know where he is?" Isaac asked.

I gave him a strange look. "How should I know?"

He just shrugged. "You two are, like, into each other."

I frowned at him. "Vinny's not into me."

"He rejected you again?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. When he put it like that, it made me feel worse than before. The rejection stung enough, but being reminded this wasn't the first time, made the wound go deeper.

"Sorry," Isaac mumbled, with a look of pity.

I couldn't even be mad at him. Maybe I needed the reminder so I wouldn't throw myself back at Vinny just to be disappointed again.

We spent the rest of the night downstairs with our friends and I did my best to forget about the stinging feeling.

The next day was better. I was back to my usual self and even Darren hanging out with us in the morning didn't bother me as much as it usually did.

But I couldn't say the same for Logan. He glared at the boy next to Hadley like he was going to make him evaporate into thin air. Darren paid him no mind as he intently listened to Archie retell his night with Crystal.

"So are you two going out again?" Darren asked with enthusiasm.

"Don't know. Didn't get that far," Archie replied with a shrug.

"Maybe we could double date sometime," Darren suggested, earning a sharp look of disapproval from Hadley as she roughly nudged her elbow into his ribs.

"Come on, Hads, it would be fun," Archie teased with a stupid grin, earning sounds of agreement from Darren.

Logan scoffed, shaking his head and glaring down at his lap. It wasn't unusual for Logan to have these types of reactions around Darren, but for some reason, this one caught everyone's attention.

"Logan, lighten up dude," Archie said which caused Logan's eyes to shoot up at him in an annoyed scowl. I sat back, not looking to get in the middle of whatever argument was about to go on between the two of them. I shared a look with Isaac who seemed to be having similar thoughts.

"I'm not going to lighten up while you get close with one of Seth's buddies," Logan hissed, not seeming to care about the look of surprise on Darren's face, or the anger steaming off of Hadley.

"Logan—" Darren started.

"I really don't want to talk to you," he cut him off sharply. The rest of the group was in an awkward silence, no one knowing how to alleviate the tension that was just dropped on us like a bomb.

"Hear me out," Darren responded, and then began speaking again before Logan could interrupt him. "I know Seth can be an ass and he's not all that likable."

"He picks on my brother," Logan deadpanned, crossing his arms over his chest and raising his eyebrows as if daring Darren to dispute his words. "And you're best friends with him, so you're no better."

"Seth and I have been friends since we were little kids," Darren reasoned. "I'm sure you have a friend you've known forever that you can't picture your life without."

Logan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Carson. And he's better than all of us. My friends aren't bullies."

I tried to sink back even further when Darren put his eyes on me for a brief moment. I didn't trust him, just as Logan didn't, but I'd rather ignore him than pick a fight. Darren could just decide he had enough of us and break it off with Hadley then make our lives, and Vinny's, hell.

"Fine, you're right," Darren surprised us all by saying. Even Logan let his hard gaze soften as a look of surprise took over his face. "I'll talk to Seth and get him to back off of your brother. I should have done it sooner."

Logan just nodded and looked away from him.

"Do you think we could have a truce when I do that?" Darren asked, looking to all of us for an answer, but none of us wanted to speak before Logan. Even Hadley remained quiet as she looked over to Logan.

"Do it and I'll think about it," Logan finally answered.

And with that, Darren immediately went off to find Seth.

***

Sometimes the determination in me felt like a giant flaw and one day it would get me hurt.

As soon as I stepped into the Taylors' house that afternoon, I felt the overwhelming determination to speak with Vinny, tell him how I really felt, and figure out what was going to happen with us from there. I was setting myself up for more rejection, but at least then I would know to stop trying.

It was just Logan, Isaac, Archie, and me for the afternoon. The girls wanted their own time together, leaving us at Logan's house without them.

"Hey," I whispered to Isaac as Logan and Archie spoke together. He stopped short and glanced at me as the other two continued further into the house.

"Hm?"

"I'm gonna need you to cover for me later so I can go talk to Vinny," I said in a low tone.

If he thought I was as stupid as I felt for wanting to talk to Vinny, he didn't show it. Isaac just nodded and followed Logan and Archie into the kitchen. After we entered the kitchen, the front door opened and shut again, and footsteps stomped up the stairs to signal Vinny was home.

Isaac and I shared a brief look, but I knew I couldn't escape yet.

"I just can't believe you actually haven't seen *The Breakfast Club* ," I heard Logan say when I finally tuned into their conversation.

"I don't watch old movies," Archie retorted with a scoff.

"It's not that old!" Logan exclaimed, turning to Isaac and me. "You guys have seen it, right?"

Isaac nodded while I hummed in agreement.

"That was, like, Vinny's favorite movie ever," Logan said with a fond smile and a chuckle. "We used to watch it probably at least twice a week."

"It just sounds boring," Archie replied, causing a glare from Logan.

"No, we're watching it, let's go," Logan responded, grabbing a drink from the fridge and making his way toward the living room. Archie rolled his eyes but followed him anyway.

Isaac and I followed the two of them into the room and sat down on the couches as Logan rummaged through the cabinet on the TV stand, looking for the movie. It wasn't until Logan had set it up and started it until I could slip away without him noticing. I gave Isaac a look and he nodded at me before I stood from the couch and tip-toed out of the living room.

Nerves consumed me as I quietly went up the steps, thinking of what I would say to Vinny once I saw him. He would undoubtedly try to get me to leave, and I wouldn't want to fight him on it, but I also wanted to talk to him. I wanted to stop feeling so poorly about how things went with us. I wanted clarity instead of confusion.

Before I had even realized I made it up the stairs, I was standing in front of Vinny's bedroom door. And before I could talk myself out of it, I knocked. I was met with no answer, like usual, and knocked again before letting myself in.

Vinny sat shirtless on his windowsill, about to light a cigarette. I caught him in this position plenty of times but it still surprised me to see him like this.

He looked at me with squinted eyes. "I didn't answer for a reason."

"I know," I said, stepping further into his room and shutting the door behind me. "But I wanted to talk to you."

He didn't say anything, turning away to look out his window. Vinny put the cigarette back in the carton but didn't leave the window as I stood behind him. His posture was rigid, like he was fighting against himself to keep his body turned away from me. It was almost like he didn't trust himself to face me.

"Look," Vinny started with a sigh. "I know it was not cool of me to kiss you and run off, but I'd like to just forget about it and never do it again."

I didn't want to let myself get frustrated with him. I knew he had some personal issues and he wanted to protect himself, but it was harder to put things behind us than he made it seem.

"You always just want to forget about everything," I argued, keeping my voice low, yet stern. "But forgetting isn't a solution to a problem, it just ignores it."

"I want to ignore it," he muttered.

"Well you can't, Vinny," I said, my voice raising slightly. "Because you're sending me mixed signals and confusing me and for me it's not as simple as just ignoring and forgetting about it."

Vinny turned to look at me, his expression in a hard stare, yet I couldn't tell which emotion he was emitting. He seemed shocked at my outburst, and it was shocking for me too.

"You can't just kiss me and make me *feel* something and then tell me to forget about it," I continued. "That's not how feelings work. That's not how I work."

"What do you want me to say, Carson?" Vinny raised his eyebrows at me expectantly.

"I want you tell me exactly what you want," I told him with a serious expression. "And not just *forgetting* because we both know how well that worked out the first time."

"I've already told you we can't have anything," he said, his stare becoming more intense.

"Yeah, you've said that," I quickly replied. "You've said we *can't.* But you've never said you didn't *want* anything. So what is it?"

My breath unintentionally became heavier as I waited for his response. I didn't want to be harsh with him, but I knew if I faltered, it would be easier for him to push me over and walk over me with his words.

Vinny groaned after we stared at each other for a few moments, putting his head down and rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"You make everything so hard," he mumbled, keeping his head down.

"Then just tell me you don't want anything with me and I'll leave you alone," I said in a softer tone, restraining myself from reaching out to touch him.

Vinny looked up. "I can't."

We were silent for a few moments, but I was sure each of us knew what that silence actually meant. He couldn't tell me that he didn't want to have some sort of relationship with me because he *did* want to.

"We don't have to be anything serious," I told him, moving to sit beside him on the window sill.

He tensed when my leg leaned against the side of his, but soon after, he relaxed. My breath hitched at our close proximity.

"We can go slow, at our own pace," I continued, my voice soft and quiet as I spoke to him. "We don't have to tell Logan."

He slowly turned his head to face me, his expression contemplative and much like the look he gave me before he kissed me the last time. His lips parted and he let out a shallow breath.

The moment seemed to freeze in time, my nerves squeezing my stomach and my mind telling me to be the one to run away before I had to face the sting of rejection once again.

But my body stayed in place. And I waited.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Kinda a little bit of a cliffhanger sorry (not sorry).

What did you think of the chapter? What about Darren saying he'll get Seth to leave Vinny alone? Do you think that'll work? And Carson going to talk to Vinny? Do you think his frustrations are valid? What do you think Vinny will say?

17

Vinny Taylor

The next events blurred together like a fever dream. One moment I was staring at Carson's waiting lips, the next I let out a breathy "yes" and my lips were on his. A moment later we ended up on my bed, Carson on his back while I straddled his hips.

Part of me felt I needed this. I needed to stop resisting and allow myself to be close to him, no matter how frightened that made me. The other part knew I had lost my willpower.

Carson let me lead him and take charge. He laid back, moving his lips to the rhythm of mine. His hands rested on the sides of my thighs, unmoving, while I had a hand on the side of his neck and the other buried in his hair. A small sound of pleasure pulled from his throat when I tugged on his hair with my fingers.

I could feel his trepidation in the kiss like he was worried I would run away again. I tried to assure him I wouldn't through the way I kissed him, slow and smooth with a bit of urgency.

We continued like that for a little while longer until footsteps made their way down the hall and I sat up, my head snapping toward the door. I looked back toward Carson and rolled off of him with wide eyes.

"Hide!" I whispered, lightly pushing him as he began to sit up.

He looked around the room. "Where?"

I stood up and pulled him up to a standing position, pointing on to the floor and motioning for him to get under the bed. He crawled under the bed just in time for Logan to open my door and see me standing up and staring toward the doorway.

"Hey I'm going to order some food," Logan said as he swung open my bedroom door. "What do you want?"

"Doesn't matter," I quickly replied, overly conscious of Carson's body that laid beside my feet.

Logan gave me a strange look.

"Have you seen or heard Carson around up here?" Logan asked me. "Isaac said he had to call his mom but I have no idea where he is."

"How the hell would I know?" I was hoping Logan wouldn't notice my overly sharp tone, giving away my nerves and unease.

He sighed. "Never mind."

Logan stood silently in the doorway for a few more moments, and the longer he stood there, the more agitated I got.

"You can get out now," I said in a rushed tone.

Logan just nodded and shut my door as he left. I didn't let Carson out from under the bed until I heard my brother's footsteps heading down the stairs.

"That was close," Carson chuckled as he slid out from under the bed. I released a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

"Too close," I told him, pushing on his chest to have him sit in front of me on the bed while I stood. "We need to make some ground rules."

Carson smiled down at my hand on his chest then back up at my face as I retracted it. A deadpanned expression hardened on my face as I stared down at him.

"Focus," I hissed, yet his smile remained. "First thing, we need to keep this quiet for a little bit. At least until we're sure this thing between us is actually working out."

"Well, yeah. I know that," Carson said with a chuckle. "I'm not even out of the closet yet."

I sighed. Right.

"Okay, second thing," I continued. "We need to go slow. I'm not– I just–"

I didn't know how to explain to him how vulnerable this situation made me feel without outright saying it. I had absolutely no experience with real relationships, and the more I thought about it, testing my ability to actually be in a relationship with the person who I had crushed on for years didn't seem like a good idea.

"Vinny," Carson said softly, grabbing my hand in his and rubbing his thumb over the back of it.

He looked up at me with an intensity that I had never seen. That look alone captivated me and stopped all the thoughts swirling around in my head.

"We'll go slow," he continued in the same soft tone that seemed to comfort me. "Whatever you need, or want, we'll do. You don't need to stress out so much about it."

He didn't realize that stress was a constant with me. I was never not stressed, and adding this relationship to the mix would be adding even more stress.

I was stressed and scared. I was scared of ruining anything we could possibly have together. Scared of him not being able to put up with me. Scared of being open with him. Scared of how he could hurt me. Scared of being too attached.

"You should probably go back downstairs," I said after a few moments of staring at each other in silence. Carson looked slightly disappointed and my heart clenched at the sight. I added the fear of disappointing him to my list.

He nodded and stood up, but before he could walk away, I grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him in for a kiss. I felt him smile against my mouth,

the disappointment he felt vanishing as soon as our lips touched.

"Can I call you later?" Carson asked as he slowly pulled away from my lips.

I nodded and released his shirt from my hands. He smiled down at me and placed another quick kiss on my lips before leaving the room and going back to his friends.

I stayed standing in the place that he left me, my mind reeling over the events that just took place. So much had changed in the span of a few minutes and now I had to process it all.

Without even thinking about it, I sat back at the window sill and pulled out a cigarette.

***

Carson Hughes

My spirit had lifted considerably since the day before, and my friends had noticed.

"Why are you so giddy?" Hadley asked me as we all sat together in the morning before the bell rang.

"Yeah, seriously, you haven't stopped smiling since we sat down," Dana added in agreement with Hadley.

I looked at the two of them and shrugged, the smile staying situated on my face.

"Is me smiling that bad?" I asked with a laugh.

Not only was I happy about what happened with Vinny yesterday, but the air around the group today was void of any tension. Darren wasn't sitting with us and there was no mention of him. It was like how we were before that drama started, light and carefree.

"Of course not," Dana denied, shaking her head. "But I think any of us would like to know what's made you so happy."

I just shrugged again. "I'm just in a good mood."

I thought back on the night before. Vinny and I had spent hours on FaceTime before finally falling asleep. That was what made everything that happened with us feel so real, that he was willing to sit on the phone with me for hours and talk about nothing. I also had so much happiness and excitement in me because of the plans the two of us had made for later today.

"Did Logan seem suspicious after you went back downstairs?" Vinny asked, his eyebrows furrowing together. It made him look absolutely adorable.

"He just asked where I was," I told him. "I just said I was outside taking on the phone with my mom. He didn't notice me come down the stairs."

"So what are you doing tomorrow?" Vinny wondered after nodding at my words.

"Probably same as today, going to your house," I answered.

Vinny looked conflicted for a moment as if he was unsure if he wanted to say what he was thinking.

"Maybe sometime we should go to your place," Vinny said. "Your mom is usually working, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but won't your parents and Logan be wondering where you are?"

"I'll tell them I'm staying after at school," he answered. "I won't stay too late."

I smiled at that.

Part of me wanted the day to go by fast just so I could go home with Vinny later, but the other part was nervous. Although Vinny had said he was done

running from me, I was still skeptical. It was just something I'd have to get over and build trust with him.

As Archie delved into a conversation about *The Breakfast Club* , which he *did* end up liking, I wondered where Vinny spent his time in the mornings. He undoubtedly spent the time alone and I wished I knew where so I could keep him company. He probably sat in our English class, waiting for the bell to ring.

When the morning bell finally went off and I walked to class with Isaac, I was surprised to see Vinny was sitting in the seat next to mine where he had been sitting before he tried avoiding me. My smile grew a little wider and Isaac let out a small laugh as the two of us took our places.

"You decided to come back here?" I asked him with a grin. He smelled of smoke and had his hood pulled over his head as he glanced at me with his eyebrows raised.

"I can leave if you want me to," he replied in a snarky tone.

"No, you should stay," I said before glancing over at Isaac who wasn't even paying attention to us.

"That's what I thought," he retorted, opening up his book with his eyes scouring the pages.

After English, I didn't see Vinny again until lunch after he sent me a text message.

meet me in the locker room, it read.

Vinny skipped gym class which had left me wondering if he had skipped out on school all together for the day. After the class had cleared out of the locker room, and I was heading to lunch with Logan, Vinny's message came and I made up an excuse about having to talk with a teacher before turning back.

When I entered the locker room, Vinny sat alone with his lunch on the bench in front of the lockers.

"You eat your lunch in here?" I asked, taking my backpack off and sitting down beside him.

He shrugged. "Sometimes. Sometimes I go outside."

"It seems kinda lonely in here," I said. Our words echoed in the room. I looked around the room and all of its emptiness.

"That's why I like it," Vinny said. "No one comes in here."

I nodded, a small smile blooming on my lips. Vinny ripped off half of his sandwich and handed one of the pieces to me.

"No, I'm fine–" I started, trying to hand the piece back to him.

He rolled his eyes. "Just eat it. I can't finish everything Logan packs me anyway."

Knowing he wouldn't take the half back from me, I started eating it. The two of us sat in a comfortable silence while we ate the sandwich and shared the carrots and crackers Logan had packed for him. Vinny wasn't kidding when he said he wouldn't even finish what he had. Logan had packed *a lot.*

"So are you still coming over to my house later?" I asked him as he continued eating.

Vinny looked up at me an nodded. "Yeah, I'll wait until Logan leaves the parking lot and then I'll head over. Will your mom be home?"

I shook my head. "No, not until after six."

Vinny finished up his food and put everything back into his backpack before scooting closer to me on the bench. I smirked at him as his face leaned closer to mine until finally meeting my lips for a kiss.

I placed my hand on the side of his head, moving his hair back. My hand brushed over the healing cut from when he passed out in the bathroom just a couple weeks ago. It was strange how much had changed since then.

Vinny's hand moved to my waist, pulling me closer to him. Our lips moved quickly together, our teeth meeting by accident a few times. After a few minutes of this, Vinny stopped and bit down on my bottom lip, pulling away slowly until it fell from between his teeth.

"Well, this has been fun," he said an a split second later, the bell signaling the end of lunch rang through the room.

"Did you just time our make out?" I asked with disbelief in my tone.

Vinny chuckled, looking down at where I sat with a playful expression.

"I'll see you later, Carson," he said before turning and leaving me alone in the locker room.

I sat back for a few moments, watching as he left and settling in the anticipation of being alone with him again.

**

Hi all! Sorry this took a while to get up. I've been super busy getting ready for school (I had to secure an internship for this semester and it took a lot of work). Also, I start school tomorrow AND have to do an internship AND still have to work so updates will probably be less frequent but I am almost done with school forever and I can't wait.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter. Were you surprised that Vinny and Carson got together? What would their ship name be? Any predictions for how their relationship will be?

18

Carson Hughes

I never knew how much I craved the feeling of having someone leaning against my body, secured under my arm, until Vinny was there. His smaller body fit perfectly next to mine as our breathing matched the same rhythm. He was much calmer here with me than he had ever been the last few times he was at my house. Instead of sitting alone on the other couch with a rigid posture, he sat against me with our bodies together. I felt as though this was progress, a step in the right direction of us gaining each other's trust.

Vinny rested his head on my shoulder and had his arm loosely wrapped around my waist, his fingers gripping my shirt. His gaze was set on the television, an episode of *That 70's Show* playing, which I learned was Vinny's favorite show. He was appalled that I had never seen it and insisted we watched it.

He chuckled softly every so often, causing him to shake lightly against me. I looked down at him, causing his gaze to turn up to me.

"There you go fuckin' staring at me," Vinny teased with a small grin.

The mark on the side of his head where he had hit it a few weeks ago had healed but left a mark. Now when he smiled, it indented on his face which I couldn't help but find endearing.

"Watch the show. You can't tell me you don't find it funny," he added.

"It is funny," I agreed, no longer feeling embarrassed at him catching my staring. "Do you want anything to eat?"

Vinny shrugged, directing his attention back to the television and shifting his hand to rest on my stomach.

"What did you tell your parents you were doing after school?" I asked, changing the subject. We weren't at the stage in our relationship where I felt comfortable forcing him into things, especially since he was obviously capable of making his own decisions and hated when his family tried making them for him.

"I said that I got detention for falling asleep in class," Vinny told me, keeping his eyes on the television.

I couldn't help but chuckle at that. "And they believed you?"

Vinny shrugged. "It's not that hard to believe. It's something I'd do. I used to fall asleep everywhere. It made my grandmother so mad."

"It seems like it doesn't take much to make her mad," I replied and Vinny laughed, sitting up slightly so he could look at me.

"It doesn't. She's fucking crazy," he said, shaking his head. "That whole family is. I don't know how they function."

"Have you seen them since the cookout?"

Vinny shook his head. "They say we isolate ourselves from the family, but they pretty much ignore us until they want to blame us for something."

Hearing Vinny speak about his family made me sort of glad I didn't have much of an extended family. My mom had a sister, but she lived across the country with her family, and I didn't see any of my dad's family. Sometimes I wished for a family I could be close with, but I supposed not having one was better than having one like the Taylors.

"Mostly they blame my dad for keeping me from Robbie," Vinny added, referencing his biological father. "As if that's not also *my* choice and none of their business."

I didn't know much about what went on with Vinny's biological father. I remembered years ago he used to visit him every once in a while, but those visits seemed to get lesser and lesser until they stopped altogether.

"Why do they want you to live with Robbie so bad?" I asked, confusion in my tone. My expression pinched together with curiosity.

"Hell if I know," Vinny muttered. "Probably because he's my grandmother's favorite because she feels bad for him. And she's mad I've never met his other kids."

My eyes widened. "He has other kids?"

Vinny snorted. "Oh yeah. Twins. A boy and a girl. They're, like, seven or eight?"

"Wow."

"Yeah, he met some woman and got her pregnant and I've barely seen him since. I doubt she even knows about me," Vinny replied with a sigh and I decided not to ask him questions about it, even though I had so many bouncing around in my head.

I was glad he felt comfortable enough with me to say these things on his own, but I didn't want to push it by asking him a bunch of questions he may not want to answer. Especially the one I had about his biological mother. I remembered that she had left Robbie when Vinny was only a baby. I didn't imagine he knew much about her at all.

"My grandmother's mad we didn't go to Robbie's wedding, mad that we've never met his kids," Vinny continued in an almost bored tone. "As if he's ever made any effort. Not that I want him to."

The conversation ended after that and the two of us sat in front of the television longer than either of us expected. The sun started to set and the headlights of my mom's car shined through the window of the living room. Vinny and I detached ourselves from one another and sat up straighter. I checked my phone for the time and realized that Mom must have gotten out early since it was just after five.

"Shit," Vinny cursed, looking down at his phone. "I have to get going."

Just as the two of us stood up from the couch, Mom walked in the door with her purse slung over her shoulder and her hair tied up in a bun on the very top of her head. She stopped short when she realized Vinny was there.

"Hey guys," she said with a wide smile, her eyes glancing at me longer as if trying to send a nonverbal message.

"Hi, uh..." Vinny started, looking to me for assistance.

"You can just call me Cass, honey," Mom finished for him with a laugh.

"Hi, Cass," Vinny finished with a small smile.

"You get out early, Mom?" I asked her and she nodded.

"They offered and I didn't want to pass it up," she said. "Would you like to stay for dinner, Vinny?"

"Thanks, but I have to get going," he said, the easy smile still on his face. "It was nice seeing you."

"It's always great to see you," Mom agreed. "You'll have to stay sometime."

Vinny nodded and turned to me.

"I'll walk you out," I told him, following him toward the door and not missing the look Mom gave me as we walked by her.

"I feel bad saying no to your mom," Vinny muttered as we walked out to his car.

I shook my head. "It's fine. Sometime we'll actually have you over for dinner."

Vinny nodded, but didn't say anything else. He looked up at the house briefly, then back at me.

"I guess I'll see you later," he said, opening the driver's side door.

"I'll call you later?"

He smiled. "Sure."

And with that Vinny got in his car and drove away. I watched him go before turning back to the house and going inside where Mom was waiting for me with a knowing expression and a teasing smile on her face.

"So there *is* something going on with Vinny Taylor?" she said, her grin widening.

I playfully rolled my eyes, but didn't confirm or deny what she said. I moved toward the stairs to go to my room.

"You'll have to tell me eventually!" she shouted after me.

I just laughed and shut my bedroom door behind me.

***

The warm weather was beginning to wind down as October approached us. This would be one of the last weekends the heat from the summer could be enjoyed, not that I particularly enjoyed it, but the rest of my friends did which was why we were spending our Saturday at the lake a town over from us.

I immediately gravitated toward a spot with enough shade to completely shield me from the sun, much to the dismay of Hadley and Dana who were looking to lay in the sun. Logan set down a blanket for us to sit on, stripping off his t-shirt and then sitting down beside me.

Isaac was on my other side while Archie and Darren sat across from us, and the girls were a little ways away lying on towels in the sun.

It wasn't necessarily surprising to see that Darren had come with us, but it was surprising that Logan hadn't sent him any scowls or made any snide comments about his presence. He wasn't being friendly to him, but he wasn't being unkind either. Maybe Darren had really talked to Seth and

Logan appreciated it enough to leave him alone for the day. Maybe he thought Darren wasn't as bad as he once thought. I wasn't so convinced.

It was probably because I was dating Vinny now, but now *I* was the one who wanted nothing to do with Darren. Maybe Logan was wrong about me being a better person because he definitely seemed to be more forgiving.

Logan turned onto his side, resting his head in his hand to look over at me.

"So, how has your mom been doing?" Logan asked in a curious tone.

For a few days during the week, when I was actually spending time with Vinny, I had told Logan I was staying home after school with my mom because she wasn't feeling well. Now that he was asking me about it, I felt a little guilty for lying to him, and for using my mother to do it. I had to make a mental note to think of a better excuse for the next time, one that didn't involve my mother being ill.

"She's good," I replied casually. "It was just a bug. She got over it quick."

"That's good," Logan said with a nod. "You missed Hadley trying to convince us all to go to homecoming."

I snorted out a laugh and shook my head. The six of us had never gone to homecoming, and never had the desire to. We had ended up going to prom the year before and ditched early. School functions just weren't our thing. They weren't Hadley's thing until now apparently.

"She wants Darren to ask her," Logan whispered as Archie, Isaac, and Darren were having their own conversation. "Like some special shit. I don't know. It's gonna make me look bad if he asks Hadley and I don't ask Dana."

"I don't think Dana is going to care," I told him truthfully.

"But I'm kinda worried about it," he said. "Because what if she just acts like she doesn't care about it just because I don't care about it?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're thinking too hard about it. Just ask her if she would wanna go."

"Will you ask her for me then tell me what she says?" Logan asked, a sly smile on his face. "That way I would know if she wanted to be surprised with something."

I laughed at him, shaking my head. "I guess I could do that. But if you guys end up going with Hadley and Darren, I'm not going."

He gave me a strange look. "Why not?"

"Because I have no interest in it and I wouldn't have a date," I told him.

If my relationship with Vinny was a normal one, I'd have a date without a problem, but it wasn't. Not that I thought Vinny would want to go even if we were out as a couple, and I wasn't even out of the closet to all of my friends yet.

"You could always ask someone," Logan said, sitting up. "I'm sure there are plenty of single girls waiting for a guy to ask them."

I was sure there were, but I wasn't that guy.

"I don't want to go with someone I don't know. It'd be weird," I argued, raising my eyebrows.

"You know everyone, Carson," Logan said with a sigh.

"Not enough to want to go to homecoming with them."

"You could go with Isaac," Logan countered, glancing over at our friend who had a disturbed look on his face as he listened to something Archie was saying.

"Or me and Isaac could stay home," I replied with a smile.

"What about us staying home?" Isaac asked, causing the attention to turn to Logan and me.

"Carson doesn't want to go to homecoming," Logan responded. "He said if I go with Dana and Hadley goes with Darren, you two could stay home."

"What about me?" Archie asked with an offended look on his face. "You would leave me to fifth wheel?"

"You have Crystal," I reminded him.

"She wouldn't want to go to some stupid high school dance," he retorted.

"So you're thinking of coming along, Logan?" Darren asked him casually. I expected Logan to ignore him or give him some sort of snide comment, but he just nodded and kept his face neutral.

"Carson's going to see if Dana actually wants to go and then I'll ask her if she does," he told him.

"I never said I would ask her," I reminded him, nudging my elbow into his side.

"But you will because you love me," Logan said with a chuckle.

"I'm planning on asking Hadley soon," Darren said. "She's been leaving hints."

"Hints?" Logan asked.

"Yeah, like being on Pinterest while we hang out, looking at dresses," Darren continued. "And talking about how she's never gone. Has Dana left any hints?"

Logan's face went slightly pale as he thought about Darren's question.

"Possibly? Maybe?" Logan rushed out in a panicked tone. "I don't know."

"If Carson doesn't want to ask Dana, I can see if Hadley knows," Darren offered.

"That might be better actually," Logan replied. "She might be suspicious if Carson asked."

I nearly scoffed out loud at his words. Even though Darren seemed to be not as awful as we once thought, I still found it strange how Logan had warmed up to him in just a few days. It was possible that he truly got Seth to leave Vinny alone, but even then, Darren had never stopped his friend from being a bully, and possibly even enabled him. That made him just as bad and I wasn't about to warm up to him because he did one nice thing.

"Are you guys going to come for a swim or what?" Dana shouted over to us.

She and Hadley stood a little ways away from us, their clothes on their towels and replaced by their swimsuits. Archie immediately stood up and tossed his shirt down on the blanket and made his way over to him. Darren and Logan were slower to get up, but went with the girls nonetheless, leaving Isaac and I on the blanket.

"So you're going to be my homecoming date?" Isaac teased. "Or are you going to sneak off with Vinny?"

I laughed, throwing my head back slightly. "Probably the second option."

"I can just tell Logan we're hanging out," Isaac said. "So you can be with Vinny and I don't have to go to the stupid dance."

It was moments like these I was glad Isaac knew at least some of what my relationship with Vinny was, though I felt guilty that Vinny was unaware of Isaac's knowledge. I would tell him eventually, but I never did know when the time would be right.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Let me know what you thought of the chapter. What did you think about Carson and Vinny hanging out and Vinny opening up a little bit? What about the lake with the group?

19

Vinny Taylor

"Vincent, you look like you've put some meat back on your bones," my grandmother commented as soon as we walked into her house. I didn't even bother responding, my energy for the day already depleting.

Sometimes it was hard to even get out of bed or leave the house, and I couldn't control it. I never used to be like this, slow moving and unmotivated. Days like this felt like they lasted years, sometimes I swore they did. And there was no reason for it. My mind just decided on its own that it was going to feel like it would rather turn off and be blank. When my mind felt like this, clouded yet empty, all I wanted was to lock myself away and let the time pass.

But I was dragged out of my room by my dad and forced into the car to go to my grandmother's because apparently it was her birthday. I thought the thing with getting old was that you stopped celebrating your birthday, but for her, that obviously wasn't the case.

"He's been following the diet the nutritionist gave him," Dad told her as we all shuffled into the house. "He's been doing really well with it."

It didn't feel that way. Whenever I looked into the mirror, it was like there was no progress. To me, I still looked sickly, too skinny and pale with sunken in eyes and face that showed my bad attitude.

I let my grandmother hug me and place a kiss on my cheek before I wordlessly followed Logan to the living room and sat beside him on the couch.

"Are you okay?" Logan asked, looking up from his phone. "You haven't said much."

I shrugged, not even feeling energized enough to act like I was okay. Usually I would have had some sort of snarky or smart ass remark, but I couldn't even bring myself to do that.

"You should have told Dad you weren't feeling well," Logan told me, his lingering look on my face before he glanced down at his phone.

"Like that would matter," I muttered, closing my eyes and leaning my head back on the couch.

Logan gave me a look. "It would."

The two of us sat in silence after that. He was on his phone, most likely texting Dana, while I stared up at the ceiling. I was sure I had texts from Carson unopened and waiting for me, but I couldn't bring myself to read them. I didn't want to risk lashing out on him as I was prone to doing when I was in this state. Or unloading my baggage. It was best for the both of us if I just waited it out and answered him when this passed.

I nearly fell asleep on the couch before Dad called for Logan and me to go to the kitchen for dinner. Before I even made it there, I knew I wouldn't be able to stomach any food. Whenever I was like this it was hard to eat anything. It wasn't that I didn't want to eat, it was just hard.

We sat down at the table where the rest of the family already was. Luckily, my aunts weren't there and it was just us and my grandmother. I could tolerate my grandmother as long as she didn't bother me too much.

Everyone started eating, but I had trouble even lifting the food onto my fork. My grandmother was never a good cook anyway.

"The rest of us are going to Robbie's tomorrow," Grandma said as she sliced the meat on her plate. It was just like her to bring up a sore topic before anyone even got food in their mouths.

"That's nice, Mom," Dad replied, though his tone gave away his lack of interest.

"I wish you'd get over your weird resentment so we could do things as a family," Grandma retorted. She used that voice that made it seem like she thought she was better than everyone. I supposed she actually did think that.

I looked down at my plate, wanting to be anywhere but in the middle of the argument that was about to take place.

"Mom, can we not talk about this right now?" Dad asked with a heavy sigh. "Can we have one meal together without talking about it?"

I finally brought some food to my mouth, the meat my grandmother had prepared. It was bland, yet had some sour taste I couldn't quite place. It was shit.

"I just wish you could play nice for one day, *my birthday* ," Grandma said as she continued cutting her food. "I think if you and Robbie actually talked things out, you'd get along."

"Mom, I am forty-five years old, I don't need you to to mediate between me and my brother," Dad said, sounding more aggravated now.

Logan looked to me out of the corner of his eye, a slight look of disgust that I could only imagine was due to the food in front of us. Mom pushed around her food on her plate, obviously having the same feelings.

"Obviously I do!" my grandmother exclaimed. "Since you haven't even seen him in almost ten years! And you keep his son from him!"

"Let's not talk about this in front of Vinny please," Dad said through gritted teeth. I knew it was only a matter of time before he stood up and made us all leave in the middle of dinner. I couldn't wait for that moment.

I eventually blocked the conversation out, solely focusing on trying to eat what was in front of me.

My stomach turned as I continued eating and I abruptly stood up, alarming my family as their eyes shot to me. I quickly ran out of the room and into the bathroom before throwing up in the toilet. Logan followed me into the

bathroom and kneeled behind me, rubbing my back as I dry heaved. I couldn't tell if I threw up from the disgusting food or if my mood started physically affecting me.

"I know that food was shit," Logan said as I sat back, offering me a cloth.

I nodded, wiping my face and letting out a shaky breath. Mom stood in the doorway of the bathroom then came in and helped me up off the floor, wrapping her arm around me and rubbing my back.

"We're going to go home, okay?" she said in a soft tone, leading me out of the bathroom.

Dad and Grandma were standing up by the table when we got back to the kitchen. Dad had a look of concern as he made his way over to me and put the back of his hand against my forehead as if checking my temperature.

"You look pale," he said, taking his hand away and turning to his mother. "We're going to take Vinny home."

I didn't pay attention to my grandmother's response as Mom led me out to the car. I sat in the back seat with my head leading against the window, my eyes closed as I tried not to think about the motion of the car.

"You should've told us that you weren't feeling well," Dad said, glancing at me through the rearview mirror. "Then we wouldn't have had to come."

" *Jeff* ," Mom hissed, smacking his arm. "Would it kill you to show a little compassion?"

"Sorry!" he exclaimed. "Are you alright, Vinny?"

All I did was groan in response. The ride back home wasn't long and soon enough I was able to lock myself away in my room like I wanted in the first place. I didn't want to be bothered for the rest of the night, hoping that my mood would pass and I could go back to normal tomorrow. As normal as I could.

I hadn't even realized I fell asleep until I felt someone's hand grazing my cheek and my eyes snapped open to see Carson in front of me.

"You haven't been answering me all day," Carson said softly. "Is everything okay?"

I didn't want Carson here. I didn't want him to see me like this, or subject him to the way my moods made me treat people.

I groaned and turned over to face away from him, but he didn't leave. He stayed beside me, his hand still on my face. Carson stayed still, like he didn't know what to do. He probably wanted to cradle me in his arms like the good person he was.

"Vinny?"

"I need you to go," I mumbled against my pillows.

"What?"

"I need you to leave," I said, louder this time, and I was sure he heard me.

Carson didn't move and I could imagine the disappointed look on his face that seemed like I was always the cause of.

"Seriously, is something wrong?" he asked, moving his hand to my shoulder.

I turned and shot an icy glare at him, his disappointed expression turning into a shocked one.

"Get out, Carson," I said through gritted teeth.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

"Just get out!" I nearly yelled. "I don't want to see you. I don't want to see anyone. I want to be alone."

"Okay, I'm sorry," Carson said in a low voice, standing up from the bed with his mouth turned downward in a frown.

I watched as he left and shut my door behind him. Once he was gone, I felt the stinging tears in my eyes. I cried because I knew I would always end up disappointing him and there was nothing I could do about it.

There was something wrong with me that I didn't know how to fix and it would stay with me forever, severing and destroying ties I had with anyone.

***

Carson Hughes

My mind was elsewhere as I sat at the dinner table with Mom, Paul, and Spencer. Paul had come over and cooked dinner for all of us, leaving my mom feeling less stressed about this dinner than the last. Once we were done eating, Mom and Paul went to the living room to watch a movie while Spencer and I went up to my room.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, me on me bed while Spencer was at my desk, before I decided to start a conversation.

"Are you going to homecoming?" I asked.

"I'm taking pictures, yeah," Spencer replied with a nod.

"Right, I forgot you were in charge of that for yearbook," I replied.

"Are you going?" he asked me.

That was a loaded question. I had planned to stay home with Vinny that night, but after what had happened with him the night before, I didn't even know if he still wanted to be with me. The rest of my friends were going, except for maybe Isaac.

"Not sure yet," I said, trying not to sigh. "My friends sort of last minute decided they were going."

"It'll probably be lame," Spencer said. "Usually is."

"You've gone before?"

"I've taken pictures for it every year," he said. "Usually Vinny and Marina would come with me and Marina would sneak in Fireball nips to make it a little more exciting."

It was strange to think about Vinny ever showing up to a school function, whether it was just to keep his friend company or not. It was hard to even imagine him there, dressed up in nice clothes, his hair slicked back, standing in the corner of the gym while girls looked on and hoped he would ask one of them to dance. The image in my mind had me wishing that we would be able to go together.

"Maybe I should do that," I replied in a light tone. "But I'd probably end up stuck as the DD."

Spencer chuckled. "Uber, dude."

"True, apparently Darren's having an after party so we might need one," I told him.

"Darren?" he asked, tilting his head to the side. "You hang out with him?"

"Not really," I said. "He's dating Hadley, so it's kinda by default that I hang with him."

Spencer's face was unreadable, his lips pressed tightly together.

"So..." I trailed after a beat of silence. "You're not taking a date."

Spencer shrugged. "Just going with Marina. You?"

I quickly shook my head. "I don't have a date. If I'm even going, I don't have anyone."

"It's really overrated," Spencer said. "It's really only fun for the freshmen and the senior guys who try to get with them and you don't seem like one of

those guys."

"Definitely not," I agreed.

I stole a look down at my phone, willing there to be a message from Vinny, but there was nothing. Part of me wanted to be angry with him for sending me away without an explanation, but I felt more sympathetic and confused than anything. He didn't seem like himself and I knew there had to be a reason.

Spencer and I spent the rest of our time watching a movie in my room before Paul called up the stairs for his son. Once he was gone, I glanced down at my phone again, only to see a message from Logan.

From: Logan

I asked Dana. It was cute as shit by the way.

I rolled my eyes and responded.

To: Logan

im sure it was

Without responding to my text, Logan's named popped up in a FaceTime notification and I instantly answer.

"So you're coming with us, right?" he immediately asked.

"I don't know..." I trailed with a sigh. "It's gonna be lame."

"Not if you're with us," Logan countered, raising his eyebrows. "Will you at least come to Darren's after?"

I shook my head. "I'm really not a big Darren fan. I thought you weren't either."

"I'm not a *fan* ," Logan started. "But I can be civil with the guy. From what I've seen Seth hasn't bothered Vinny since he talked to him."

"That you know of," I pointed out.

"I genuinely don't think he has," he replied. "Maybe I was wrong before about blaming Darren for Seth's actions."

"You didn't blame him for his actions," I said. "You rightfully held him accountable for tolerating Seth."

"And he's trying to make things right," Logan said in an even tone. "I can't really blame him for anything after he tried to fix things."

"I don't know why you're defending him."

Part of me could see where Logan was coming from. The real problem wasn't Darren, it was Seth. But for some reason I couldn't set the two apart. Maybe I was the problem.

"And I don't know why you care so much," Logan shot back, though his tone wasn't too unkind. "Vinny's my brother. I appreciate you looking out for him, but he's my brother."

And he's my boyfriend, I wanted to say

"And I think I was too hard on Darren anyway," Logan continued. "I just took out my anger at Seth on him. We should give him a chance, for Hadley at least."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm not saying we have to be best friends with him but we should at least try not to scare him away from Hadley," Logan added. "We'd never hear the end of it."

I knew he was right about that. It wasn't exactly fair to Hadley if we were the reason Darren decided to break up with her. And she would be angry with us for God knew how long.

"I guess," I eventually relented.

"Just give him a chance, I am," Logan said. "And come to his after homecoming party with us."

And maybe I would.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading! Sorry this took so long to get out. I've been so busy lately with school, my internship, and work.

What did you think of the chapter? What's up with Vinny? Why did he treat Carson like that? What do you think about Carson and Spencer hanging out? And his conversation with Logan?

20

Carson Hughes

Spending the afternoon alone in my house wasn't something I usually did, so when I told Logan I couldn't go to his house on Monday afternoon, he was undoubtedly confused. However, he didn't question me as he and the others went over to his house.

It wasn't that I necessarily wanted to avoid Vinny after what had happened over the weekend, but I knew it would be hard to keep myself from trying to see him if I was there. I had decided I would wait for him to come to me, so staying out of his house was the easiest way to keep myself from breaking the promise I made to myself.

What I didn't expect was a knock on my door in the afternoon, and opening it to see a winded Vinny with his cheeks flushed and his breathing heavy.

"Did you run here?" I asked him with an alarmed look.

Vinny nodded and I ushered him inside.

"Why?" I wondered.

"I was on a run and just kinda ended up in your neighborhood," Vinny explained, his breathing evening out. "I know what it sounds like but I'm not kidding."

A minuscule smile spread on my lips as I realized Vinny seemed to have gone back to normal. He didn't seem to be in the spirits he was over the weekend, with sunken eyes, pale skin, and a look of emptiness.

"Can we talk?" Vinny asked in a low voice.

He looked uncomfortable even saying that. He was never the one to start the conversations between us, but it seemed as if he knew he had to start

this one. If there was anything I knew for sure about Vinny it was that he hated being vulnerable, and by the look on his face, that rang true.

Vinny nervously took his bottom lip between his teeth as he waited for my response.

"Of course," I told him, leading him into the living room, the two of us sitting side my side on the couch.

He was silent for a few moments as if trying to gather his thoughts and grasp at the right words to say. I waited as patiently as I could, knowing opening up, like he was about to do, was difficult for him.

"On Saturday, I wasn't feeling well," Vinny started. "I felt like shit."

"I could tell."

Vinny's eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn't direct his glare at me. It was almost like it was inward, directing it at himself.

"Sometimes I get like that and I can't help it," he explained, directing a wide eyed gaze at me. "It's like there's this dark cloud over me and it controls me. It makes it impossible for me to feel anything or pull myself out of it. It's suffocating."

He paused for a moment before he continued, "And I kinda just have to wait for it to be over," he said. "It's not an excuse, but it's an explanation at least. I was hoping to avoid you until it was over."

"You should know by now that it's hard to avoid me," I said.

Vinny scoffed. "Yeah, you just invite yourself in whenever you want."

"Well you don't ever invite me in, so I have to find my own ways," I teased, and Vinny looked slightly embarrassed.

"I have to get used to actually wanting someone in my room," he sheepishly admitted, running a hand through his hair.

"That's okay," I said with a grin, reaching out to put a hand on his leg as he turned to face me. "I can force myself in until you're ready."

Vinny snorted out a laugh and leaned closer. I was beginning to be able to tell when he was implicitly telling me what he wanted. And when he inched closer to me with his eyes softening and the tension leaving his shoulders, he wanted my arm around him.

I pulled Vinny to me, wrapping my arm over his shoulder as he let out a content sigh.

"I– uh," Vinny stuttered. "I'm sorry for how I acted the other day. I just realized I never said that."

"I'm just glad you came over," I told him. "And that you're better now, of course."

"Whatever that means," he muttered, leaning closer to my side and resting his head on my shoulder. I had come to find out that despite his closed off, sharp exterior, Vinny loved to be cuddled.

"Maybe you should talk to someone," I lightly suggested, brushing his hair back off his forehead with my hand. "Other than me."

"Like a therapist," he said, not as a question, like he had thought about it before.

I didn't say anything else, and neither did he. I didn't want to overstep and I was sure he didn't want to go into it more than he had to. It was enough for now to get the thought out there.

Vinny turned into my side, burying his face in my chest and letting out a long sigh before standing up from the couch, looking down at me.

"I have to go," he said. "I told my dad I was going on a run. He's going to start looking for me if I don't show up at home soon."

I held out my hand for Vinny to pull me up so I was standing in front of him.

"Do you want me to drive you?" I asked.

Instead of answering, Vinny placed a kiss on my lips.

"You're cute, but no," he said, pulling away and placing his hand on my shoulder. "That would look suspicious. I'm sure my dad is staring out the window waiting for my return."

I hummed in agreement, leaning in to kiss him again.

"Did Logan say anything about me not going over there today?" I wondered aloud as I pulled away from him.

"Not that I know of," Vinny replied, his hand on my chest. "I just noticed you weren't there and knew it was because I fucked up."

Vinny still looked slightly embarrassed, a look I wasn't used to seeing on him. It took a lot for him to come here and I knew that. Despite the way his actions the day before made me feel, I couldn't help but instantly forgive him. That might have been a dangerous habit to get into, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

"Gotta run," he said, making his way toward the door.

"Why don't you come over tomorrow?" I asked him with a hopeful gaze. He looked out the door briefly, then back to me.

"You're going to be able to get away from Logan two days in a row?"

I shrugged. "I don't *have* to always hang out with him."

Vinny seemed hesitant at first but his face softened after a moment and he seemed to give in.

"Alright," he said.

Vinny gave me one last kiss on the mouth before jogging off my porch and down the street back toward his house.

***

Vinny Taylor

My feet slapped down on the pavement as I rounded the corner out of Carson's neighborhood. I left his house feeling lighter, like a burden had been lifted from my chest and the guilt I had felt from before eased slightly. Even then, my mind couldn't help but remind me that Carson was way too good for me. I wished I could push that thought out of my head, but it was always there, front and center.

Even running did nothing to clear my mind. It was like it was making my thoughts louder and more prominent. I didn't know how to make them stop. What I thought could be a distraction for me wasn't. It was more like an amplifier.

My train of thought was interrupted when a car pulled up beside me, causing me to abruptly stop on the sidewalk. I knew exactly who it belonged to almost instantly.

"Well isn't this a nice surprise," Seth said through the open window of his car, a viscous smirk on his face.

"More like a huge inconvenience," I spat, though my confidence wavered when he stepped out of the car and made his way to me. It probably would have been in my best interest to run, but I was already tired and I was sure if he wanted to, he could catch me.

"I didn't purposely seek you out," he said, leaning against his car. "Even though that's probably what you're thinking."

"So why did you stop?" My fists were clenched by my sides and the only reason I wasn't completely shutting down was because he was keeping his distance.

"I haven't seen you in a while," he said with a shrug. "Darren's been on my case about leaving you alone. Hadley has him on a tight leash."

I didn't respond, wanting to vanish from the scene instead of standing in front of him.

"I also have something to say to you," Seth continued, trampling over my silence.

"Then just say it," I snapped, growing more and more agitated the longer I stood there.

In reality I should have felt fine. We were in public, though no one was around, but being alone in Seth's presence was one of the most uncomfortable feelings in the world. I didn't truly like being alone with anyone but Carson, but even that was taking some getting used to.

Seth let his amused look fall into a sneer, but he stayed against his car, far enough away from me where I didn't feel the need to bolt out of there. Part of me didn't know if I truly feared him or if I had just exacerbated any fear in my own mind.

"Just because Darren is letting some bitch control him now doesn't mean I won't have my eyes on you," he said in a low, menacing tone.

I clenched my jaw as the two of us glared at each other from where we stood.

I wanted to snap at him, tell him off like I would if we had an audience. But we didn't so I stayed quiet. There was no one around to keep him in check and I didn't want to find out just what he would do to me if I made him angry enough.

"That it?" I bit out through clenched teeth.

"Didn't want you to get too comfortable without me around," Seth said with a shrug, the sneer on his face going back to a normal expression. He pushed himself up off his car and started walking back around to the driver's seat.

Seth drove away with out another word and I didn't start running again until his car was out of sight.

It was then that I was grateful for the intrusive thoughts about Carson that came rushing back to keep my mind off of the interaction with Seth. After that I didn't mind the amplified thoughts about how I wasn't good enough for Carson and how I knew eventually he would leave me after dealing with my shit for too long.

I had been right that my father would be staring out the window waiting for me when I got home. I jogged up the porch steps and walked into the house with a heavy breath, greeted by my father upon entering.

"That was a long run," he commented, though his tone seemed more interested than accusatory. "Where did you go?"

"Around town, through the park," I lied. It was a run I frequented when I used to go more often. "I'm a little out of shape. It took me longer than it used to."

Dad smiled and patted me on the shoulder. "You'll get there. It just takes time. You're just in time for dinner."

I followed Dad into the kitchen, Luna coming up beside me once she saw me pass the living room. I stopped and pet her before entering the kitchen where Mom, Logan, and Dana already sat at the table. I greeted them with a brief wave before washing my hands and then sitting down at the table.

Luckily, my parents were much better cooks than my grandmother, so even if I wasn't all that hungry, at least their food was appetizing.

"How was your run, sweetie?" Mom asked, pecking me on the cheek as I sat down beside her.

"Fine," I replied, taking a bite out of the food in front of me.

"I don't know how you run so much," Dana said, taking a sip of her water. "I'd die."

"That's because you're not remotely athletic," Logan told her with a snort.

Dana and Mom shared a look, each of them shaking their heads.

"You're son is so rude," she told Mom.

"I know, I don't know why you stay with him," Mom replied, earning a sound of protest from Logan while I let out a small laugh of my own. He deserved it. "Where's Carson today? He didn't want to come over for dinner?"

Although nobody looked at me, I still felt like I was being stared at. Mom's question was obviously meant for Logan and Dana, but I almost felt obligated to answer it. I sat back in my seat, hoping none of them noticed the tinge on my cheeks.

"He's been acting a little strange," Dana said slowly, as if she was trying to find the right words.

"No he's not. He's just..." Logan trailed, letting out a sigh. "Busy? I don't know."

I knew Carson making excuses to Logan as to why he couldn't be here wouldn't work for long. Carson was always here like he was a member of the family. It was obvious it wasn't going to take long for them to start questioning what was going on with him. I couldn't help but feel at fault for his recent absences.

"Maybe his mom is taking some time off," Dad suggested as he cut up his food. "She seriously deserves it."

Logan shrugged. "Could be. She started seeing someone."

"Good for her!" Mom exclaimed.

I hadn't known Carson's mom had started seeing someone. I tried not to let the fact that Logan knew bother me, but it did because it made me realized that I didn't know much about Carson at all. It was a small thing, not something that would really come up in any of our conversations, yet it still put a twinge of guilt in me. Maybe he hadn't told me because I hadn't asked.

As soon as I was excused away from the table, I went up to my room and opened my window to sit on the window sill. I lit a cigarette and pulled my phone out to FaceTime Carson after realizing he had texted to make sure I got home alright.

"Hey," Carson greeted with a wide grin. He sat on his bed, leaning back against the headboard.

"Hey," I replied, blowing smoke out my window. "You wanna go somewhere tonight?"

He shot me a look of confusion. "Tonight?"

I nodded, coughing slightly as I took another drag.

Carson still looked confused, but he shrugged anyway.

"Sure, where are we going?"

"I'll pick you up at eleven."

**

Hi all! Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter. What did you think about Vinny's apology to Carson? And his run in with Seth? Where do you think they're going to go?

21

Carson Hughes

The anticipation of waiting for Vinny made it impossible for me to sit still. I felt like a little kid, impatiently waiting for whatever piece of excitement I was promised. It felt pathetic, but I couldn't find it in me to care. Any alone time with Vinny was enough to make me impatient for it to start and dreading the end.

My eyes shifted from my phone to the window, waiting for any indication that Vinny had made it to my house. When my eyes finally landed on him standing outside my window, I sprung up and rushed outside to meet him.

"You walked here again?" I asked once I was outside, noticing Vinny hadn't taken his car. I assumed that when he said he would pick me up he meant that he would be driving.

Vinny shrugged, his hands in his sweatshirt pocket.

"I like to walk," he told me, nodding his head in a gesture for me to follow him.

I looked back at the house to make sure all the lights were still out and I hadn't woken my mother before turning back to Vinny and walking by his side. The two of us were silent for the first few minutes, walking through the cool air in the surrounding darkness. If I was alone, the thought of walking around at night would not be appealing, but with Vinny it was calming and I felt content. The stars above us shined more brightly than I had ever seen, making the dark sky have a subtle glow.

Vinny's steps were nearly silent beside my heavy ones. He always seemed to move quietly like he could move through the world hiding in the shadows if he wanted to.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked him, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"Just for a walk," he said, not meeting my gaze. "I used to sneak out all the time and go on walks at night. I thought since we're kinda together now it'd be a good idea to have you come with me. I know it's stupid—"

I slipped my hand into his and grinned at his startled expression.

"It's not stupid," I assured him, intertwining our fingers and rubbing my thumb over the back of his hand.

I shoved the paranoia about the two of us being seen to the back of my mind. I wanted to connect with Vinny, to allow him to be vulnerable and share things with me. It was only fair that I allowed myself to feel vulnerable too.

"Where do you usually go on these walks?" I asked him as he let the tension in his shoulders fall and his hand grip mine tightly.

"Usually the path behind the park," he said, looking briefly down at our hands and then back up at me. "I used to run there too, but it's better at night."

We fell into a comfortable silence, swinging our hands together with each step. The night was cool, but the warmth from Vinny's body being so close to mine kept the chill from pricking at my skin. Vinny squeezed my hand as we crossed the street to walk into the park.

The park was empty as we expected it would be. I looked around, remembering I hadn't been here in years. It was a large green space on one side of the lake in our town. The park was surrounded by wooded area with nature trails winding around the area. I couldn't pinpoint the exact last time I had been here, but some memories flooded in.

There was a time that I was here with Logan and Archie, before we had been friends with the others, and Archie nearly drown in the lake. This side didn't have a beach or anything, so most people didn't swim over here. The

swimming area was on the other side. But, of course, Archie wasn't one to follow the rules and jumped into the lake fully clothed and got his foot caught on something beneath the surface. Logan had to go in after him, and he wasn't happy about it.

I glanced over at the lake where the moonlight shined and illuminated the ripples in the water and silently laughed at the memory before turning my gaze back to Vinny. He stared straight ahead, but he seemed to be even more comfortable now that we were here. He took in a deep breath as if savoring the fresh air before looking to me and tilting his head to the side in a gesture for me to follow him.

Wordlessly, Vinny led me down a path that led to the nature trails. It was then that I understood what Vinny meant when he said the path was better at night. I looked up to see the clear sky above us, the stars more visible than ever. The lake was visible through the trees with the shine of the moon. The night around us was glowing.

"I fell out of that tree once," Vinny suddenly spoke, pointing to one of the tall trees in front of us.

The tree had already lost most of its leaves, but there were still quite a few orange and red ones that were hanging on by a thread. The rest of the leaves pooled around it like they were decorating the ground.

"That doesn't really surprise me," I told him with a chuckle. "You seem to have made a habit of doing things that others would consider dangerous."

Vinny snorted and let go of my hand, picking up his pace toward the tree. I tried to keep my mind off the sudden coldness traveling through my fingers, shocked by the loss of the warmth Vinny's hand had provided.

"You're going to climb that tree that you've already fallen out of?" I shouted after him as Vinny grabbed onto a low hanging branch and pushed his feet against the trunk.

Vinny didn't answer as he continued up the tree, my stomach tightening as he went higher and higher until he settled on a thick branch and sat down

with his legs dangling.

"You coming up or what?" he shouted down at me, and if I wasn't so infatuated with him, I would curse at him.

I made the swift decision to follow him up there. I didn't want him to think of me as a coward and I wanted to spend time with him. There would be no time spent together if I was on the ground at the bottom of the tree he was currently sitting in.

I worked to keep myself steady as I used all of my upper body strength to heave myself up into the tree. I couldn't even be embarrassed at the thought of Vinny looking down at my struggle because I was too focused on making sure I didn't fall to my death.

My stomach dropped as my foot slipped, but I quickly pulled myself up and finished the climb. I let out a heavy breath when I sat down next to Vinny, gripping the branch beneath us so tightly that my knuckles turned white.

"I don't know how you find this enjoyable," I breathed out, turning my head to him to see that he was already grinning at me.

"Is it really that surprising?" he asked.

"Not really," I admitted. "But it's definitely not enjoyable."

Vinny let out a quiet laugh before the two of us sat in silence. Then, after a few moments, Vinny's hand found its way to mine, resting on top of it like it was trying to pull the tension from me.

"I haven't been here in a while," Vinny said quietly. "Not since— not since the summer."

"Why not?" I asked him, suddenly feeling more at ease with his hand over mine.

"I just stopped coming, I didn't want to anymore," he said. "It used to be my favorite place to think. I would spend hours here."

"And you wanted to come here tonight?"

"With you, yeah," Vinny sheepishly replied, his pink cheeks visible under the glow of the moonlight and stars.

I was beaming at him once his words registered in my mind.

"Sorry if that's fucking weird," Vinny continued, coughing into his elbow. "Or if it's horrible and you want to leave."

I moved my hand from under his and placed it comfortingly on his knee. Vinny tensed for a moment and let out a breath, but he didn't make any indication that he wanted me to remove it.

"No, it's great," I told him with sincerity. His eyes went from my hand on his leg up to my face. "I like spending time with you. In the ways that we can."

Vinny leaned closer to me as my other hand still gripped the branch. I met his lips with mine in a soft kiss. He felt almost timid as he kissed me slowly, like he was still worried about how I thought of him. We pulled away slightly, staring into each other's eyes before touching our lips together again. This kiss was shorter, but felt soft and vulnerable all the same.

"I wish I had a spot like this," I told him, our faces still close. "I don't have anywhere special that I can just go."

Vinny cleared his throat. "We can share this one." He looked away from me after he said it, like he was embarrassed or worried about rejection.

All I could do was smile. "I'd like that."

"You're going to have to get better at climbing trees," he told me in a low tone. I laughed at how serious he sounded.

"Luckily, I'll have you to help me," I replied.

His lips quirked up slightly at that, in a way that if you blinked you'd miss it.

Suddenly, our relationship felt steadier. We hadn't been together long, but it had already felt like we were off to a rocky start. But Vinny being so open with me, sharing this space with me, finally made it feel like we were going somewhere. It felt like we actually wanted this to work and to be freely in each other's company.

I didn't know how long we sat there. It could have been minutes or hours, but eventually we decided it was time to leave. I clumsily climbed down the tree, glancing up for a brief moment to see Vinny shaking his head at me before he started his descent.

As soon as we were on the ground, Vinny slipped his hand into mine and walked closely to me.

"Let me walk you home," I offered. "I don't want you to have to walk home alone."

"I don't want *you* to have to walk home alone," Vinny countered, raising his eyebrows.

"How about we walk to mine and I drive you?" I suggested. "Or you could stay?"

Vinny laughed. "Are you trying to bed me already?"

My eyes widened. "No! I just meant to sleep, like actually sleep."

Vinny pressed his lips together and let go of my hand to fish his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He placed one between his lips and lit it, taking a long drag and then blowing out the smoke.

"I uh," Vinny started, pausing to take another quick hit of the cigarette, "I don't think that would be a good idea either way. I don't— I'm not—"

"I get it," I cut him off. "Really. No worries."

And I did get it. He was working through some stuff, whatever it was. We had just spent hours together and he needed his space.

Vinny clenched his jaw, his eyes narrowed in the way they always were when he was annoyed with himself.

"I can still drive you home though," I suggested. "If you'll let me."

He nodded, his cigarette in his mouth. I badly wanted to tell him to drop that habit, but that would have to wait until we were more serious. I would only drive him away from me if I started making demands about the ways he needed to change. I knew I wouldn't want someone doing that to me.

The walk back to my house wasn't long, but it was silent and distant. I didn't know what had happened in that short walk from the park that made any progress we made seem to disappear. I didn't want to question it, but it was eating at me.

"Are you alright?" I asked Vinny as soon as we were both in my car. "You've been really quiet."

"I'm sorry," Vinny muttered, resting his arm on the center console and staring straight ahead as I drove down the road.

"I don't know why you're apologizing..."

"Because I always do this," he said with a sigh. "I ruin whatever nice time we have."

"You didn't ruin anything," I assured him, glancing at him briefly before turning back to the road. "Stop thinking like that. All it does is make you sad and me confused."

Vinny was quiet for a moment before he let out a low chuckle.

"How are you always so perfect?" he asked me, turning his head to me as he leaned it back on the headrest.

My cheeks burned and there was nothing I could do to hide that.

"I'm not," I told him truthfully. "I just try to be logical. And understanding."

"Well, you're pretty fucking close to it," he said. "Hey, how's your mom doing?"

My eyebrows raised in confusion at his sudden question. It wasn't that I didn't want to talk about my mom with him, but it wasn't something I expected to come up in conversation. Not to mention the fact that I had yet to tell him that my mother was dating Spencer's father and I had no idea if he would be angry with me for that or not.

"She's good," I answered after my brief confusion subsided. "Still works all the time but she's been getting some time off. Why do you ask?"

"I just realized I never really ask you anything or know anything about your life," he responded. "And it's kinda shitty that I don't."

"You know stuff about me," I told him.

"Like what? That you're gay and for some reason find me attractive?"

"I think it's obvious why I find you attractive."

He just scoffed.

"Oh, how about that you can't hold your liquor and get *very* confessional while drunk," Vinny teased with a wide grin.

My mind wandered back to the first night I kissed him and how embarrassed I was about it.

"See? There's something you know about me," I said. "Something embarrassing, but something."

"And you're really bold," Vinny continued. "Like you just say things that no one else would."

"I have no filter," I admitted. "Well, I do, but not a very good one."

Vinny chuckled and nodded in agreement. It was only a few minutes later when I pulled up in front of his house and parked the car before turning to face him.

"I really liked tonight," I admitted and his face flushed. "We should do this more often."

"Are you sure you're not just being nice and it was actually horrible?"

I rolled my eyes and leaned over the center console to plant a brief kiss on his mouth.

"I'm sure," I assured him.

"I thought you didn't like eye rolling?" he teased with a wicked grin.

"Only when you do it to me." I kissed him again.

"I have to go to the back and in through my window," Vinny said as he opened the car door.

I nodded. "Text me when you're inside."

Vinny gave me one last kiss before getting out of the car and jogging around the house. I waited until I got his text and made the quick drive back home.

**

Hi everyone!!! I know my updates haven't really been coming weekly and I apologize for that. I'm in my last semester of college and have work and an internship so as you can imagine, it's very hectic. Thanks for sticking with me!

Let me know what you thought of the chapter! Was it what you expected? What did you think about their time in the park? How do you think their relationship is progressing?

22

Carson Hughes

My friends were getting suspicious.

I had first noticed it on Monday afternoon when we were all sitting in the basement at Logan's house. My phone was in my hand and my eyes were staring at the screen as I read through the texts Vinny sent me. He was complaining about the ending of a book he had just finished reading and his commentary was comical.

From: Vinvin

i'm so fucking pissed off

like why would you kill a character and make their death a huge fucking deal just to bring them back.

To: Vinvin

shouldnt you be happy the character was brought back?

From: Vinvin

are you serious

i hated him

and his death had a purpose why couldn't he just stay dead it makes every other death so meaningless if he could just be brought back i cannot believe you said that to me

I smiled down at my phone, trying to stifle a laugh, but my expression didn't go unnoticed.

"Who's got you grinning at your phone like the Cheshire Cat?" Dana asked from where she sat between Logan and Hadley.

I looked up and noticed all eyes were on me. My friends had looks of suspicion on their faces as they waited for my response, all except Isaac who was shaking his head at me. He had voiced to me that he didn't think I was being subtle enough to keep my relationship with Vinny a secret. Of course, I had disregarded that because I didn't think any of them would pay enough attention to notice anything. And, of course, I was wrong.

"Carson are you *seeing* someone?" Hadley nearly shrieked in excitement. "And you didn't tell us?"

"Um, no?" I said with uncertainty. They all gave me expectant looks. "I mean, no, no I'm not."

"Do we know them?" Dana asked, completely ignoring my words. "Is it someone from school?"

"Or is it a hot lifeguard from the summer camp and you're rekindling a summer romance?" Archie added in a teasing tone.

"It's no one," I told them, locking my phone and sliding it back into my pocket. "I was just on Instagram."

" *Sure* , you were," Hadley sarcastically replied. "Fine, don't tell us for now. You will when you're ready."

Then, their suspicion heightened on Wednesday when I went to meet Vinny in the locker room at lunch time. When I stood from the table, they all sent me wide-eyed looks of knowing.

"What?" I asked them.

Hadley shrugged. "Nothing." Her and Dana shared a look while Archie grinned at my obvious discomfort. Logan gave me a blank stare.

"Seriously, what?" I asked, getting agitated. It really wasn't like me to get nervous around my friends, but the stress of trying to be secretive, and them

catching onto me, was eating at me.

"You just seem to be leaving the table a lot lately," Dana answered with a light smile that appeared on her face more like a smirk.

"I told you guys I'm not doing well in Physics," I reminded her. "I have to go talk to my teacher so I don't fail."

It wasn't entirely a lie. I wasn't doing that well in Physics, but I wasn't on the verge of failing. I had to think of better excuses, but I felt like it would be even more suspicious if I had a different excuse every time I decided to leave the table during lunch.

"You have to go every week?" Hadley asked. "I can help you. I'm literally taking AP Physics."

I didn't think I would ever say this, but luckily, it was then that Darren decided to make his way to the table and took Hadley's attention with him.

"Hey guys," Darren greeted, kissing Hadley on the cheek as he sat down next to her.

"Gotta go," I said, waving at them and leaving before they could say anything else.

If any of them questioned my strange behavior, I trusted Isaac to cover for me. He was better at being nonchalant than I was, and if he made it seem like nothing was going on, the others were inclined to believe that as well.

I rushed down the deserted hallway and into the locker room to find Vinny sitting on the bench where he always sat, his sandwich in one hand and his bag of carrots in the other.

"Why do you look so out of breath?" Vinny asked. "Seeing me just takes your breath away?"

"Yeah, that's it," I said with a laugh, sitting down beside him.

Vinny rolled his eyes and took a bite of his sandwich.

"My friends are catching on that something's going on with me," I admitted with a sigh, taking the half of sandwich that Vinny offered me.

"Are they?" Vinny asked with a raised brow. "That didn't take long."

"I'm not good at being discrete, okay?"

Vinny snorted. "I knew that already."

I let out another sigh, taking a bite from the sandwich.

"Them questioning me is really stressing me out," I confessed, glad to be in private with Vinny where I didn't feel like I was being scrutinized.

"Maybe you should tell them," Vinny replied in a casual tone.

My eyes widened to the point that it almost hurt.

" *What?* "

"Not about us," he clarified. "But maybe you'd feel better if you told them you're gay?"

"Then they'd just hound me about who I'm seeing and I doubt it would take them long to figure out it's you," I pointed out, glancing at him in disbelief.

Vinny just shrugged. "Do whatever you want to do, Carson."

"You'd be okay with them knowing about us?" I questioned with raised eyebrows.

He shrugged again. "I mean, not exactly. But I wouldn't be mad if you told them. If you feel like that's something you need to do."

My shoulders tensed at his words. I was suddenly aware that the only reason the two us had to hide was because of me and my insecurities. I was always so concerned with Vinny's insecurity surrounding our relationship that I forgot about my own. Maybe part of why he didn't feel secure in this

relationship was because I was so keen on hiding it. Maybe I made him feel like I didn't like him enough to have people know about us.

"I should, uh," I said, causing Vinny to turn to me with an attentive look. "I should tell you that, um, Isaac knows. He's known since the start."

Vinny was silent for a moment and I was worried that his silence meant he was angry. But then he nodded and turned back to his food, taking a bite out of his sandwich.

"Vinny?" I asked, my tone quiet and vulnerable. "Can you please say something?"

"Like what?"

"Like yell at me if you're angry or tell me if you're not?"

"I'm not," he replied, looking back at me.

"You're not mad that Isaac has known this whole time and I haven't told you?" I asked him in disbelief.

"Do you want me to be mad?"

"Not particularly."

"Look," Vinny started with a sigh, turning his whole body to face me. "It was really rocky at the start of this. I get it if you had to tell someone to talk about it or whatever."

"I sort of didn't tell him," I sheepishly confessed. "He saw me kiss you the night of Darren's party when you picked us up."

Vinny let out a laugh, a smirk etching onto his face.

"That must have been embarrassing for you," he teased.

"Yeah, it was," I admitted, scratching the back of my neck as my cheeks heated.

"It's funny when you get embarrassed," Vinny told me. "And cute. Your cheeks get all pink—"

"I get it," I cut him off with a groan.

Vinny laughed, biting down on his bottom lip. He set his food down beside him then turned his attention back to me.

"Okay, I'm ready to make out now," he said, grabbing the front of my shirt to pull me closer to him.

I let out a breathy laugh as my face moved closer to his.

"Is that all you want me for?" I asked, briefly kissing the corner of his mouth.

"We only have seven more minutes of lunch," he said, looking by my head at the clock on the wall. "Actually, six minutes and forty-six seconds."

"Always so precise," I said, placing my grinning lips over his. And that was how the two of us spent the next six minutes and forty-six seconds.

It was that afternoon that Logan actually confronted me about his suspicions.

The two of us were alone at the house. Vinny had a follow-up doctor's appointment and the others were off doing something else, leaving Logan and I at the house with Luna. He didn't say anything at first, letting me get comfortable in believing that he wouldn't bring up the way I had been acting. But that had been too good to be true.

"So, um, are you actually seeing someone?" Logan awkwardly asked, looking straight ahead at the TV.

"Why do you all think that?" I asked him, trying not to let my unease slip through my tone. If I got too defensive, it would make it even more obvious.

Logan looked at me with an expression that told me he knew he was right despite anything I said. There would be no convincing him otherwise.

"Well for starters, you've been ditching us more often now," Logan started. "And I'm not just talking about lunch, in the afternoons too. And the way you're always smiling at your phone and get weird when we ask you about it."

"So that means I'm dating someone?"

"What else would it mean?"

"Maybe I picked up a new hobby," I said, and I knew it sounded stupid as soon as I said it.

Logan raised his eyebrows. "Did you?"

I didn't answer him, and that was an answer in itself. Logan sighed and looked back at the TV with a bit of a pout on his face.

"I just don't get why you didn't tell me," Logan muttered. "We tell each other everything."

"Logan," I sighed. I didn't know what else to say. He was making me feel bad, but I still wasn't ready to confess to him.

"I get that we drifted apart over the summer because you were at the summer camp for two months and I was stuck here," Logan said, running his hand through his hair. "But now that you're back it still feels like we're drifting. I hate it."

"I'm sorry," I groaned. "I just— I guess I kinda felt like that too. Like you weren't telling me stuff but I didn't want to be bothered by it because I knew that things had changed over the summer."

"Is there a reason why you're keeping your relationship from us?" Logan asked. "Like are you embarrassed or whatever?"

"Logan."

He looked back at me but didn't say anything. We were sitting in silence for a few moments before he decided to speak up.

"Look, I won't bother you about it anymore," Logan relented, turning his gaze to me. "I can't say the same for the others, but I won't talk about it until you're ready to tell me."

I smiled at him, but didn't say anything. Any response, or lack there of, would let him know that he was right about me having a relationship. But I knew that I wouldn't be able to keep this secret for much longer.

***

Vinny Taylor

I stretched my legs out in front of me as I sat in the uncomfortable chair in the waiting room at the doctor's office beside my dad. Dad was reading a magazine and every so often he would nudge my arm when I let out a bored sigh or he wanted to show me a picture. I really wasn't that interested in the fishing magazine he was holding, but I looked at it to entertain him anyway.

When the nurse finally poked her head through the door and called my name, I stood up and followed her. Dad set the magazine down and walked in with me. The two of us had discussed that he would come in the room with me since this was a follow-up about my weight gain and not just a regular checkup. I agreed because I knew that I wouldn't know anything about what the doctor had to say and he would be there to retain all that information so I wouldn't have to.

"You can take your shoes off and step on the scale," the nurse instructed in a kind tone. I slipped my shoes off and did as she said, looking straight at the wall so I wouldn't see my weight.

It wasn't that I was ashamed of the number on the scale, but I never wanted to know it. It seemed insignificant to me and it would only make me more self conscious to add another thing to the long list of things that were wrong with me.

The nurse didn't say my weight out loud, but Dad let out a content hum, so I knew that meant I must have gained at least some weight since I was at the hospital a few weeks ago.

After getting my height, weight, and blood pressure, the nurse led the two of us to a room where we waited for the doctor. Apparently this was going to be more like a regular check up than I thought because she had me change into a gown.

"I think the doctor is going to be happy about your progress," Dad said, sifting through the magazines beside the chair he sat in.

I shrugged. "I guess."

"You've been doing good, Vinny," he said. "Except for the throw up thing, but I blame that on my mother's shit cooking."

"It really is shit," I replied with a nod of agreement. "So is Logan's, by the way. Tell him to stop cooking for me."

Dad threw his head back in laughter before finally settling on a magazine.

"I would like to think neither of you boys get anything from my side of the family," he started, "but Logan definitely got that from my mom."

I was probably more like my biological father than Dad wanted to admit. He never mentioned it, but I knew it was true anyway. With how he fell off the deep end, suffered from addictions, and just became an unpleasant person, I knew I was beginning to resemble him even in small ways.

"I probably have Grandma's craziness," I pointed out.

Dad scoffed. "Not even fucking close." I thought he was in denial.

It was then that there was a knock on the door and the doctor stepped into the room.

"Good afternoon, Vincent, Jeff," Doctor Martinez greeted, closing the door behind him.

I nodded at him in a greeting while Dad offered an "afternoon."

Doctor Martinez sat down on his stool and typed something on his laptop before looking to where I sat.

"So, you've made some good progress in the last few weeks," he said. "You gained about seven pounds, but I'd still like to see you gaining some more. How has the diet been going?"

I shrugged. "Fine, I guess."

"Has it been easy to stick to? Or are you having some difficulty?"

"Sometimes it's too much," I admitted.

"When it's too much do you finish the food at a later time? Or do you just not finish it?"

"Depends."

Doctor Martinez nodded. "Okay. I want you to try to break the meals up into more frequent, smaller meals if it seems like it's too much. That way you can eat smaller portions while still getting all you need for the day. Can you try that?"

"Sure, I guess," I replied. It didn't seem like I had much of a choice.

"So instead of three regular sized meals, try five or six smaller meals," Doctor Martinez suggested, looking between Dad and me.

Dad asked Doctor Martinez more questions and I just zoned out during it until he asked me to lay back so he could feel around my stomach. The rest of the appointment was short and I was supposed to go back in a few more weeks to make sure I made better progress on my weight.

I wasn't took concerned about it though. My appetite was small at times, but the thought of eating didn't repulse me like it did before.

When Dad and I arrived home, we were met by Logan and Carson sitting together in the living room. I shared what I hoped was a subtle look with Carson as I walked inside. I wished the others were here so it would be easier for Carson to sneak up to my room, but when it was just the two of them, it would be nearly impossible for him to get away with that.

"What do you boys want for dinner?" Dad asked. "I was thinking a pasta dish."

The three of us just nodded in agreement and I jogged up to my room, immediately texting Carson.

To: Carson

would it be too much to ask you to try to get away from logan for a little while?

From: Carson

unfortunately yes. he's already suspicious

To: Carson

about us?

From: Carson

no about me being in a relationship in general

To: Carson

:/

that fucking sucks i wish his nosy ass would just mind his own goddamn business From: Carson

lol

all my friends are starting to get suspicious

To: Carson

as you've told me

lucky for me i dont have any friends to get suspicious of me

From: Carson

:/

Eventually he stopped texting and I could only imagine it was because Logan was complaining about him being on his phone instead of paying attention to him.

Dinner with my family was even more unbearable when I couldn't openly talk to Carson in the ways that I wanted to. I wanted to be able to sit beside him, for the two of us to have our own conversation, but he was at the other end of the table, sitting across from Logan.

"So how did your appointment go today, Vinny?" Mom asked from beside me in a soft tone.

"Fine," I replied, stuffing food into my mouth. "Still need to gain weight."

"You're doing well," Mom said, briefly brushing her hand on my shoulder. My parents kept saying that, but it didn't feel like I was.

I felt Carson's stare on me, but it was only brief. Conversation shifted after that and I was glad for the attention to be somewhere other than me.

I could only hope that Carson and I could find the time to sneak off together.

**

Hi everyone ! Thanks for reading .

What do you think about Carson's friends being suspicious ? How do you think they'll find out? What about Carson and Vinny in the locker

room? And Vinny's appointment ?

23

Carson Hughes

My life lately had felt so much like a long game of hide and seek. It was a game I was never good at, nor did I enjoy, but this one was much higher stakes than any I had played before. Part of me felt exhilarated by it, like I was finally a few steps ahead and winning the game. The other part of me felt like it was only a matter of time before I slipped and got found.

There were quite a few times over the last few days I found myself hiding under Vinny's bed while his brother or one of his parents walked in. Most of the time I didn't have to stay there for long, but there were times, like at this moment, that I had to stay under for longer than I would have liked.

Jeff had been standing in the doorway talking to Vinny for the last ten minutes and my back was starting to ache from staying still on the hard floor. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Jeff left and closed the door behind him. Vinny leaned over and looked at me under the bed.

"You can come out now," he said, moving to stand at his full height.

I heaved out a relieved sigh and shimmied out from under the bed, rubbing my lower back as I stood.

"We have to start putting pillows under there or something," I said quietly, stretching my arms over my head.

"I didn't expect him to tell me his life story while he was in here," Vinny grumbled, throwing himself down on the bed. "All that just for him to tell me he's leaving."

I plopped myself down on the bed beside him, lying on my side with my elbow down to prop my head up. Vinny's eyes glanced down at me, down my torso and legs then back up to my face. He exaggeratedly rolled his eyes at me and rested his head on his pillow.

"What was that for?" I laughed.

"You're hot," Vinny snapped.

I laughed again, wrapping my arm around his waist to pull him to me and stifle my laughs in his chest. He stilled beneath me then put one hand on my head and the other on my arm that was over his stomach.

"And that annoys you?" I asked with my smile against his chest.

"Yes," he replied. "It's really fucking annoying."

Vinny pulled my head back by my hair, causing me to look up at him, and placed a fast kiss on my mouth. I nearly groaned at the feeling.

"We have to get up," Vinny said, releasing my hair.

I lifted my head up from his chest and lifted a brow.

"No one's home and Luna's alone downstairs," he continued, standing up from the bed. Vinny shoved his hand through his hair as I followed him off the bed.

When he opened the door, Luna was sitting outside in the hallway as if she had been waiting for us to pay attention to her. As soon as she saw us, she stood up and wagged her tail.

"See, she's lonely," Vinny said, crouching down and scratching behind her ears.

I smiled down at the two of them before following them down the stairs and out to the back yard where Luna immediately picked up her frisbee and brought it over to Vinny who then tossed it out into the yard. Luna caught the frisbee out of the air then brought it over to me.

I tossed the frisbee for her and Vinny turned to me.

"So, what are you doing the night of homecoming?" I asked him.

Vinny shrugged. "I don't even know when it is."

I chuckled at him, playfully rolling my eyes as Luna brought the frisbee back to Vinny. He tossed it further this time, causing Luna to run even faster than she had before.

"It's this Saturday," I told him. "The football game is Friday night and the dance is the next night."

He shrugged again. "Probably the same thing I do every Friday and Saturday night."

"Nothing?"

"Exactly," he replied with a deadpanned look. "Is this your way of asking me to homecoming?"

"Not exactly..." I trailed, swaying on my feet as Vinny narrowed his eyes slightly before throwing the frisbee for Luna again. "I wanted to see if you wanted to stay over on Saturday night."

I had hoped that in giving him a few days notice, he would be more inclined to actually want to stay the night at my house. By the look on his face, I could tell he was debating with himself. His lips were pressed tightly together and he looked away from me briefly to watch Luna as she ran.

"Will your mom be home?" he asked, bringing his attention back to me.

I shook my head. "Just us. She has night shift at the hospital that night."

Vinny hummed in understanding and nodded his head. He let out a breath as if he had been holding it.

"Okay," he said.

"I figured we could, like, get take out and watch a movie or something?" I stammered, suddenly feeling more self conscious.

I didn't want Vinny to have the idea that I was only inviting him over for sex. Although I wouldn't at all be opposed to that happening, he didn't seem all that interested in taking that step yet. It wasn't that he didn't seem attracted to me, but more like he was nervous to go that far, stopping it before we got remotely close to more than kissing.

Vinny grinned and my insecurity about the situation fled my body.

"Alright," he finally said. "I'll have to sneak out though. My parents know I don't have any friends."

I didn't have any time to reply to him before Logan called my name from the back porch. I instinctively stepped away from Vinny, worrying I had been standing closer than I should. The both of us turned at Logan's voice, seeing him leaning forward on the railing of the porch. When I didn't make a move to go over to him, he hopped over the railing and made his way to us.

"I didn't know you were coming over," he said.

I shrugged. "I was just bored at home," I lied.

Vinny looked away from us toward Luna, seeming to try to exclude himself from the conversation. Logan briefly looked past me at his brother, his lips forming a thin line before glancing back to me.

"You wanna come inside?" Logan asked in a casual tone.

I really didn't. I would have much rather stayed outside with Vinny and Luna, enjoying their company and the fresh air. But it wasn't like I could tell Logan that.

"Sure," I answered, trying to sound enthusiastic but not sure I succeeded.

I spared a glance back at Vinny, who was too preoccupied with Luna to glance back, before following Logan back into the house.

"It's kinda impressive you hang out with him and he doesn't run off to his room or curse you out," Logan told me as soon as we were inside.

"He's done both of those things to me," I told him, causing Logan to let out a quiet laugh.

"Well, you must be doing something right if he hasn't continued," he said.

If only he knew. I didn't know how Logan would react if he knew that the reason Vinny kept me around was because we spent a lot of our time kissing. It was hard to tell if it would make him uncomfortable or if he would be supportive.

"You're going to come with us to the homecoming game Friday right?" Logan asked me as we sat down in the living room.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'll come."

Although I didn't enjoy football, I felt bad that I was ditching my friends for the first homecoming dance they decided to attend in our four years of high school. I would feel too guilty if I skipped the game too.

"There's an after party at Darren's Saturday night too," Logan continued, flipping through channels on the TV. "If you and Isaac want to meet us there."

"How about you call us if you need a ride?"

"Boring," Logan snorted, kicking his feet up on the coffee table.

A few moments later, Vinny came back into the house with Luna following closely behind him. As she started drinking from her water dish, Vinny stood in the living room for a moment before moving toward the couch and taking a seat beside me. I tried to keep my attention away from Logan's strange stare as his brother leaned back on the couch. If Logan hadn't been suspicious about Vinny and I before, surely he was now.

I knew by the look on Logan's face that he was confused about Vinny's sudden arrival in the living room, but he didn't want to say anything about it. I remembered back to the time Dana invited Vinny to watch movies with us and Logan seemed to be against it.

It always seemed like he didn't want Vinny to be around when any of us were around until he went to the hospital. Maybe Dana had convinced him to accept when his brother decided to hang around, even when he was with his friends or his girlfriend. Or maybe he actually realized that his brother needed him.

Luna finished her water and sat down by Vinny's feet, the three of us sitting in silence with our gazes locked on the television. There was minimal conversation between Logan and me while Vinny remained silent. That was how we spent the rest of the afternoon.

***

The feel of the frozen bleachers through my clothes made me think that Friday had come too quickly. I had been dreading the homecoming football game enough, but this added cold made the situation even worse.

I sat in between Logan and Isaac, the three of us wearing matching looks of annoyance with our hoods over our heads and our hands stuffed into our pockets. Hadley, Dana, and Archie, on the other hand, didn't let the cold bother them.

They stood and cheered with the rest of the crowd during the ceremony with the football players and cheerleaders before the start of the game. Then, they stood and cheered during every first down and touchdown. Hadley wore Darren's letterman jacket over his jersey, his number painted onto one of her cheeks.

It wasn't until after the game ended that I was finally shielded from the cold. I had been dragged to Darren's house by my friends for a get together he was having with us and some of his friends. Archie had convinced Crystal to meet us there because apparently they were still dating. It was the last place I wanted to be, so naturally, I sat on the couch and texted Vinny.

To: Vinvin

hey are you awake?

From: Vinvin

yeah are you guys on your way back yet?

To: Vinvin

no, hads convinced us to go to darren's

From: Vinvin

oh i was gonna wait up for you

The thought of Vinny sitting alone in his room and waiting for me to show up sent a pang through my chest. I wanted nothing more than to be sitting beside him on his bed.

To: Vinvin

i would tell you to wait up but i have no idea how long we'll be

i'm sorry :(

I waited for his response, but it never came. I tried to convince myself that he either fell asleep or didn't feel as if my last message needed a response. My paranoia convinced me that he was angry with me and it put me in a sour mood for the rest of the night.

"Hey man, are you okay?" Darren asked, sitting down beside me with a beer in his hand. "Need a drink?"

"I'm fine," I sighed, sliding my phone into my pocket. "I don't want a drink."

Darren shrugged, taking a sip of his drink. "Want a non-alcoholic one? Water? Gatorade?"

I shook my head. "I'm good."

I expected Darren to get up and leave me once I denied him again, but he stayed, resting his arm on the arm of the couch.

Being around Darren wasn't nearly as bad as I once thought it would be, especially when Seth wasn't around. There was no doubt in my mind Seth would be here if he hadn't taken some poor girl to his house after the game.

"Are you coming over after homecoming tomorrow night?" Darren asked, turning his head slightly to face me.

I shook my head. "Only if they need a ride."

"You should stop by and hang out for a bit," Darren suggested in a casual tone.

I didn't know how to tell him in the nicest way possible that I had no interest in getting along with his crowd. Even if my friends had started associating with them, I wasn't about to join them. Even if Darren was nice enough, I knew they all weren't like that.

So I didn't say anything and Darren laughed from beside me. I looked at him, thinking he was laughing at me, then realize he was grinning ear to ear at Hadley who was in a chugging contest with one of the football players.

"She's gonna beat him," he said with a fond expression. And she did.

Hadley cheered and her eyes met Darren's before he stood up from where we were sitting and she threw herself into his arms.

I stared up at them, envying how they could be so open and free together and no one would say a word. Then I suddenly felt guilty for the way Logan and I had reacted to Hadley's news about dating Darren and wished we hadn't tried to make her feel bad for it.

When we got back to Logan's house later that night, Vinny's light was off and his door shut and I didn't let myself in.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you think of the chapter! What's your favorite part of the book so far? Favorite character (and fave beside Carson or Vinny)?

24

Vinny Taylor

I let out a heavy breath as I sat in my car in front of Carson's house Saturday night. I had been sitting outside for the last five minutes, willing myself to just get out of the fucking car and go inside. My head was telling me to move, but my body wouldn't let me.

I hadn't let myself be stressed over spending the night at Carson's since he invited me, but blocking all that stress out made it come at me with full force the very moment I pulled up to the house. I was worried about what I would do, how I would handle being alone with him for the whole night and how he would think about me after. This was a bigger deal than I thought Carson realized.

My eyes had been focused straight ahead while I was lost in my thoughts, so I hadn't noticed someone walk up to the car until they tapped on the window.

My heart nearly pounded out of my chest at the noise and my head shot toward the window to see Carson standing outside with a look of concern plastered on his face. That was enough to finally move me out of the car.

"Are you okay?" Carson asked as soon as I opened the door, stepping out of the way so I could get out. "You've been sitting here for, like, ten minutes."

"I'm fine," I told him, pulling my pack of cigarettes from my pocket and lighting one I placed in my mouth. "I just zoned out."

Carson's eyes flickered to my lit cigarette and he pressed his lips together tightly like he was holding back from saying something.

When I finished my cigarette, Carson led me inside to where he had blankets and pillows set up on the couch in the living room with food

placed out on the table. The lights were dimmed and a few candles across the room were lit, setting a fresh and outdoorsy smell to the room.

"Did you make all this food?" I asked him with raised eyebrows.

Carson sent me a sheepish smile, glancing at me then at the table.

"Hopefully my cooking is better than Logan's," he said with a nod.

I snorted. "I'm sure it is. He's not hard to beat."

Carson chuckled and briefly placed his lips on my cheek before leading me over to the couch and pulling me onto it with him. I tried not to let it show just how much he affected me. I felt like I was blushing like a little kid any time he showed me any affection. It was nauseating.

He didn't seem to notice as he gestured toward the food laid out before us.

"I hope you're hungry," Carson said with a grin. I nodded, looking toward the table.

The two of us ate the food, which was much better than Logan's, while Carson flipped through different movies trying to find one we agreed on. I didn't really care what we watched, knowing I had very little intention to actually watch it, but he was intent on finding something I wanted.

About ten minutes into the movie, after both of us finished eating, my hand found its way into Carson's hair. It started out with my hand on the back of his neck, causing him to lean into me, then my fingers buried themselves into the hair at the base of his neck. After a few minutes of twisting it through my fingers, I pulled on it, causing him to look at me, then my lips were on his.

Carson made a surprised sound before he gave in and moved his lips against mine. I found myself pulling his hair again as I moved into his lap, Carson's hands settling on my hips. I took one of his hands and moved it further up my torso and he followed it with the other.

I continued tugging on his hair, Carson groaning into my mouth and deepening the kiss. He moved his hands up and down my torso before sneaking them under my shirt. His hands rested on my bare skin, above my hips, as he pulled me closer to him.

Without even realizing what I was doing, my hips started grinding slowly over his and Carson let out another groan.

"You're killing me," he mumbled against my lips and I couldn't keep the smirk off my face.

I liked feeling in control of the pace we were going. With Carson under me, I was in charge of how far and how fast we went. If it could just stay like this, then I wouldn't have to worry about my own fears and insecurities creeping up on me and ruining our whole night. This I could deal with. This was what I needed.

But when Carson's hands started moving lower on my hips, it suddenly felt like that control was lost.

I pulled back and slid off his lap to sit beside him. Carson let out a heavy breath, his chest rising and falling as he starred at me in disbelief.

"That's it?" Carson breathlessly asked. "Did you time it?"

Despite the slight discomfort I felt, I let out a chuckle and leaned into his side. Resting my head on his chest, I looked down and noticed the bulge in the front of his pants and snickered.

"Sorry I know I got you excited," I teased him.

Carson just let out a breathy laugh as he adjusted himself before throwing his arm back around my shoulder as we turned back to the television.

"Hey, I'm sorry I got hung up at Darren's last night," Carson suddenly said after we sat in a brief silence. "I didn't expect for us to get back so late. I wanted to see you."

This wasn't something I wanted to talk about, especially since I spent the previous night moping in my room after Carson told me he didn't know how late they would be. It was late enough that I had been asleep when they came in and didn't notice they were there until the morning.

It was my own fault for getting my hopes up and thinking Carson would come to the house with his friends and wait for them to fall asleep before he snuck off to my bedroom to spend some time making out on my bed. Instead, I smoked nearly my entire pack of cigarettes and went to bed alone like a loser.

"It's fine," I muttered, trying to steer us away from the conversation.

"At least we get to spend tonight together," Carson said with his signature wide grin.

It seemed as though Carson had spoken too soon. Two movies and three make out sessions later, we were interrupted by Carson's phone ringing. I had been straddling his lap as he kissed my neck when the phone started blaring. At first, he ignored it, but then it started ringing again and I let out a sigh before rolling off his lap.

Carson sent me a sheepish smile as he pulled the phone from his pocket and answered it.

"Everything okay?" he answered with the phone to his ear.

He mouthed to me that the person on the other line was Isaac.

I leaned closer to Carson and placed my hand on his thigh, kissing his neck as he continued talking on the phone. He let out a content breath but otherwise kept quiet with any sounds of pleasure.

"Well, can you get them to Logan's?" Carson continued as I kissed up his jaw.

Carson put his hand in my hair, holding my head to his skin.

He let out a sigh. "Well, bring them here I guess."

That caused me to pull away and shoot him a bewildered expression. He sent me his own apologetic look as he finished his conversation with Isaac and hung up the phone.

"Please don't tell me all your friends are coming here," I said as soon as he hung up.

"I'd be lying."

I groaned and threw my head back in frustration.

"So, I guess I'm leaving," I grumbled, standing up from the couch.

Carson stood up with me. "No! I mean, you don't have to. You should stay."

I sent him a look of disbelief. He had already expressed to me that he didn't want his friends knowing about us yet, and I wasn't too keen on the idea of Logan finding out just yet either. But the desperation in his tone told me he was willing to risk it.

The two of us never had a night like this where it could be just the two of us all night long and into the morning. It was something I was looking forward to, despite my nerves, and I knew Carson was looking forward to it too.

"They're too drunk to know what's going on," Carson continued. "And then they'll just sleep and it will be like it's just the two of us again."

My mind was telling me I should go, but my heart reminded me how much I hated disappointing Carson. And how much I wanted to stay.

"And what if they remember seeing me in the morning?" I asked him.

"Then they remember."

The words seemed to scare me and thrill me at the same time. I didn't care what his other friends thought. It was Logan's unpredictable reaction that made me nervous.

I didn't have long to think about it because soon after this conversation, Isaac's headlights shined through the windows of Carson's living room and the two of us went outside to help him with the drunks.

"Sorry to bust in on your date," Isaac said more to Carson than to me, the two of us sharing only a brief glance. "I couldn't get them all into Logan's house without waking his parents and I couldn't find his house key anyway."

The others were passed out in Isaac's car. Logan had his head resting against the back passenger's side window while Dana leaned on him and Hadley on her. Archie looked to be in the most uncomfortable sleeping position in the front seat.

"Hadley didn't stay at Darren's?" Carson asked as he opened the back door on Hadley's side.

Isaac shook his head. "Darren's drunk and so is everyone else there. I wasn't about to leave her there and have something happen to her."

"That's probably a good call."

Carson pulled Hadley out of the backseat while I took Dana and Isaac took Logan, saying he would come back outside for Archie.

"Wasn't Crystal going with them?" Carson asked as we entered the house and put them down on the couches.

"She went to the dance with Archie, but didn't go to Darren's," Isaac answered before going back out for Archie.

Logan stirred in his spot on the couch, squinting his eyes at the light. Carson and I shared a look and the two of us stood completely still as if they would do anything to hide my presence.

"Vin?" Logan muttered before falling back asleep against Dana's shoulder.

"Shit," I cursed.

"He won't remember," Carson promised.

Isaac came back into the house with Archie under his arm and dropped him with the others. The three of us stood in front of the couches, staring down at their sleeping friends.

Isaac briefly glanced at me before turning to Carson. "You two can go upstairs and do whatever you were doing. I'll worry about these idiots."

"Are you sure?" Carson asked, glancing at me then back at Isaac.

"Is your mom coming home tonight?" Isaac asked.

Carson shook his head. "No, she's working the night shift then staying at her boyfriend's house."

"Okay, I'll be fine down here," Isaac assured him. "Go do whatever."

Carson hesitated for a moment before holding his hand out for me and gesturing for me to follow him up to his room.

Once we walked into Carson's bedroom, I realized I had never been in it before. Every time I was here, the two of us had spent our time downstairs, but most of the time we spent together was hidden away in my bedroom.

Carson led me over to the bed and pulled me on top of him as he laid back.

"I'm sorry our alone time got ruined," Carson mumbled against my skin.

"It's fine," I sighed. "I should probably be apologizing because it's my idiot brother's fault."

Carson laughed, his warm breath blanketing the skin on my neck.

"And my idiot best friend."

"Glad we're on the same page about how much of an idiot Logan is."

"Did you at least have a good time before this?" Carson asked me, his nerves showing through his tone. The cheesy thing would be to say that I always had a good time with him, but I was never good at being up front with my emotions.

"I'm still having a good time," I said, turning in his arms so I could face him. "The fact that all your friends are downstairs ruined any sexy mood we had going but..."

Carson let out a loud laugh but quickly stopped himself as if suddenly remembering the others were asleep and we were trying to be discrete. He left a long kiss on the top of my head and hugged me closer to him before reaching for the remote and putting *That's 70's Show* on the television that hung in the corner of his room.

"You know, this is my favorite show," I said, feeling my smile grow as the screen lit up.

"I know, you told me," Carson said with a chuckle. "And the way you laugh at it is different than your usual laugh."

I shot him a strange look. "What does that mean?"

"It's hard to explain," Carson started, looking as if he was sifting through words in his brain. "When I make you laugh it's like you try to stifle it or hide your smile and look away."

I frowned at him, but he only smiled in return.

"When you laugh at this it's like you forget anyone else is around and you let yourself truly *laugh* , like wide smile with wrinkles by your eyes."

My face heated at the thought of Carson paying that much attention to me. He had a way of making me feel warm with happiness and embarrassment at the same time.

"So what I'm hearing is that you still stare at me even though I've caught you a hundred times?" I joked, trying to hide the way I felt on the inside,

how Carson's words made my stomach tingle and my heart beat faster in my chest. I never knew someone could make me feel this way.

"I always will do it," Carson said with a shrug. "You don't always notice."

I hid my face from him, resting my head on his chest and unable to pull my lips down into a neutral expression.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I knew I had grown to like the feeling of Carson's arms around me, despite the anxiety I once felt. Being burrowed in his arms made me feel secure and protected and I knew if I could fall asleep like this every night, I would.

**

Hi everyone. It's been a while! Sorry about that, but thanks for your patience.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! What did you think about Carson and Vinny's alone time? What about Isaac bringing the rest of the gang over? Do you think anyone's going to remember what happened in the morning?

25

Carson Hughes

Vinny was already awake and playing with my hair by the time I got up the next morning. He laid his head on my chest, his left hand in my hair while his right hand rested on my stomach. I stretched my arms above my head and kissed the top of Vinny's.

"Did you sleep good?" I asked him, my voice rough from having just woken up.

"Better than I thought I would," Vinny answered, his voice clear and sounding as if he had been awake for a while.

"You could've woken me up when you got up," I told him, pulling him tighter to me.

He glanced up at me and gave me a strange look. "Why the hell would I do that?"

I chuckled and grinned down at him. "So you wouldn't have to lie here all alone while I slept."

Vinny rolled his eyes and rested his face back down on my chest and snuggled into my hold on him.

"The silence was nice," he said, causing me to let out a snort of laugher. "And my family is cursed with waking up as soon as the sun is out, I wouldn't do that to you."

That reminded me, Logan was probably awake. Despite the night he had and how much he drank, I knew Logan would be downstairs with his eyes open and a pounding headache and hopefully no knowledge of the previous night. I usually didn't wish complete blackout on my friends, but this one time I really needed him to be in a haze about the previous night. Logan's

reaction to finding out about Vinny and me was not something I was wanting to deal with this morning.

"I should go check on everyone downstairs," I begrudgingly said. All I wanted to do was stay in bed all day with Vinny. "Make sure no one is dead or throwing up."

"Logan's awake."

My eyes widened and I sat up with Vinny still in my arms, holding him out a little further so we could look at each other.

"Did he come up here?" I hissed.

Vinny shook his head. "No, but he's awake. I know he is."

"He won't remember last night," I assured him, though I was more trying to convince myself of that.

Vinny gave me a look that said he didn't quite believe that.

A moment later I was down the stairs, after walking down them as slowly as I could. Logan was sitting up on the couch with his arm around Dana while Hadley's head rested on his other shoulder. He stared straight ahead and for a moment I thought he was sleeping with his eyes open. That was until he turned his head and sent me an unreadable look.

"Morning," I said, trying to sound as normal as possible, but I knew I failed when Logan didn't even crack a smile at me.

"How was your night?" Logan asked, raising his eyebrows.

I stood still at the bottom of the stairs. "It was fine, didn't do much except watch TV."

Logan nodded, pressing his lips tightly together.

"How was yours?" I awkwardly asked. It was a dumb question considering he was in my house and knew that I knew how he had spent his evening.

"Fine," Logan said and the two of us just stared at each other for a few tense moments.

Logan and I rarely ever had any sort of tension surrounding us. It only started after I started keeping secrets from him and he started seeing right through me.

"Are you going to tell me?" Logan asked in a rough tone, his voice was sharp and his eyes were narrowed with a fiery emotion.

Just by how he looked, I knew there was no way out of this. He knew exactly what was going on and if I lied to him, I didn't know if I could ever get him to forgive me. It was one thing to keep something from him that I wasn't ready to talk about, it was another to lie to his face when he knew the truth.

Logan sighed and stood from the couch, Dana and Hadley stirring as he moved them.

"I know Vinny's here," Logan said, turning to face me as he stood in front of the couch. "I know I saw him last night and his car is out front."

I let out a deep breath and clenched my hands at my side. "Yeah, he's here."

Logan started to say something and stopped before letting out a breath and directing his eyes toward the ceiling as if he was rethinking what he wanted to say to me.

"What's going on?" Isaac asked, coming out of the kitchen.

The two of us turned away from our staring match and saw that the rest of our friends were awake and rubbing their eyes in tiredness and confusion. Isaac widened his eyes at me and we shared a look that I hope conveyed to him that I was in crisis mode.

Logan didn't say anything and I appreciated that he wasn't forcing this conversation to happen in front of all our friends. That at least told me that he didn't absolutely hate me for keeping this from him. But part of me knew

it would be easier to just get it over with. It would be easier to come clean to all of my friends at the same time than having to do it over and over again and at this moment I knew I couldn't keep it from Logan any longer.

"I was just about to tell Logan something," I said, clearing my throat.

Archie squinted at the sunlight coming in through the window and put his blanket over his head, just poking his eyes out so he could see me. The girls curled up together on the couch with looks equally confused and concerned. Isaac kept a neutral face, sure to not give away that he knew what I was about to do.

"What's going on, Carson?" Dana asked after I paused for a long moment. "Are you okay?"

I nodded at her with a small, awkward smile and took a deep breath.

"This feels, like, super serious right now," Hadley said, sitting up.

"I, um," I started, unclenching my hands and clapping them together. "Well, you guys were, um, you were right when you said you thought I was seeing someone."

"I knew it!" Hadley exclaimed, standing from the couch and pointing at me. She and Dana squealed in delight while Archie pulled the blanket off his head.

"No shit!" he exclaimed, sharing a look with Hadley.

They didn't notice the discomfort on my face or Logan's rigid stance. Logan clenched his jaw and didn't say anything. He knew without me having to say it the person I was talking about. I couldn't tell if he was actually angry or just uncomfortable with the idea of me dating his brother.

"Who is it?" Dana asked.

"Is it someone from school?" Hadley excitedly shot at me.

"Is it the hot lifeguard from summer camp?" Archie added, a slight glare coming from Hadley.

I looked around at each of them and tried to be more casual, nonchalant, but by how they looked at me I could tell they saw how uncomfortable I felt.

"It's, uh, it's someone from school," I said with a nod.

"Oh my God!" Hadley and Dana squealed at the same time.

Archie slumped back in his seat. "I really thought you bagged the lifeguard."

"Archie, shut up about the lifeguard!" Hadley snapped. "I want to hear about Carson's lady friend."

It was now or never.

"Not a lady," I corrected.

I forced myself not to look away from their wide-eyed gazes. The only two who did not look at all surprised were Isaac and Logan.

"I'm, uh, I'm gay," I continued. "I'm dating a guy."

Everyone remained silent after the words left my mouth. It was like we were stuck in time. No one spoke, no one moved. We just basked in the aftermath of those words leaving my mouth. I didn't know how I wanted my friends to react, but it wasn't like this.

When I imagined it, I pictured a hug from each of the girls, words of encouragement from Logan, and some dumb comment from Archie. But I never expected to stand before them as they all gaped at me or the possibility of Logan wanting to punch me in the face with the look he was giving me at the moment. I didn't know what to do, but I couldn't stand the silence. My mouth opened again but before I could say anything, Isaac's voice cut me off.

"I'm bisexual," he said.

My eyes immediately shot to him and I couldn't tell if he was just saying that to take the attention off of me or if he was being genuine. Maybe it was both.

"Wait..." Hadley trailed, holding her hand up. "Are you two together?" She seemed to be almost excited at the idea.

"No!" Isaac and I exclaimed together.

"Carson," Logan called out, grabbing my attention away from Hadley. "Do you want to talk about this in front of everyone?"

He seemed annoyed, but I still appreciated that he didn't want to embarrass me by freaking out in front of the rest of our friends. But I didn't think I could face him alone when we had this conversation. Not with the look of betrayal I saw on him.

I shook my head but didn't say anything.

"So..." Archie trailed, looking around at each of us. "Have you two hooked up?"

"Archie!" Hadley screeched, storming over to him and smacking his arm. "That is so rude to ask!"

It felt like too much was happening at once. The silence between my friends had ended and Isaac and I were beginning to be bombarded with rapid questions, to many of them coming at once for either of us to answer.

"Wait, wait!" Dana shouted, gaining everyone's attention and stopping their questions. "I just want to say we love both of you."

Hadley and Archie excitedly nodded in agreement while Logan's nod was slower.

"But," Dana continued, looking straight at me. "Who is this boy you're seeing?"

"Dana," Logan started, glancing at me before looking to his girlfriend. "Think about who the only other gay person we know of."

It took Dana a moment before it clicked in her head and she started screaming in delight.

"You're dating Vinny!" she screeched, her and Hadley jumping up and down and squealing with excitement.

I would never understand the way they could be so invested in other people's lives that the thought of me dating someone had them screaming in delight.

"Holy shit!" Archie exclaimed, going over to the girls.

We let the three of them continue their scene while Logan, Isaac, and I still stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"So..." I started, glancing toward Isaac. "Are you really bisexual?"

He nodded. "I feel like I should've told you sooner."

I didn't say anything. Although it felt like I had been blindsided with the revelation, Isaac deserved to come out whenever he wanted to. And now I had to deal with the fact that he did it in front of all our friends just so I wouldn't be alone.

"I'm proud of you both for coming out, truly," Logan interjected, his hard gaze on me. "But I still need to talk to you about Vinny."

"Logan," Dana said, coming up beside him. "Don't be all mad at Carson for dating Vinny. He can date who he wants and this moment should be about Carson and Isaac! Don't single Carson out!"

"Well, Carson's banging my brother and Isaac isn't so—"

"Well..." Isaac trailed, looking increasingly uncomfortable and keeping his eyes away from me.

I nearly choked at what I thought he was implying and Logan's head snapped toward Isaac.

"What?" Logan snapped.

"Listen, I'm not going to let you sit here and yell at me because it's frankly none of your business," Isaac replied, his eyes locked on Logan. "But I'm also not going to let you do that to Carson."

"What are you trying to say? That you're also banging my brother?"

"Well, not currently," Isaac told him. "Over the summer? Yeah, I was."

I felt like I had to sit down otherwise I was going to pass out. There was too much going on in my head. Finding out one of your best friends has had sex with your boyfriend before you've even had sex with your boyfriend is one of the most uncomfortable feelings in the world. I felt sick.

"Oh my God!" Archie yelled, dramatically covering his wide smile with his hand. "This is *insane* ! Isaac, you legend!"

"I feel like we're on some TV show," Hadley said with a giddy laugh. "Who has the next confession?"

"No more confessions," I grumbled, not able to look at Isaac.

I made the mistake of looking at Logan who finally let his calm demeanor fall. His mouth was gaped and his eyes were as wide as saucers as he looked between Isaac and me.

"What the fuck," Logan groaned, his hand falling over his forehead as he looked up at the ceiling. "You guys seriously had to do it with my *brother* ? Why not each other?"

Dana smacked him hard on the shoulder. "That is rude to ask!" she yelled.

"Logan, Vinny's a little hottie, it's no surprise they both hooked up with him," Hadley said with a shrug.

"This is so great, oh my God," Archie said, breathless as if he had just finished laughing. "You both broke bro code in the most epic way."

There was nothing epic about finding out about Isaac's own history with Vinny, but I didn't say anything as Archie clapped me on the shoulder. It was then that I noticed Vinny at the top of the stairs with an irritated expression etched onto his face. Archie gasped when he saw him and stepped away from me, giving Vinny room to make it next to me at the bottom of the stairs.

"So," Vinny said, looking at each of my friends. "They know."

I just nodded, not able to think of any words to say at the moment, my mind too caught up in Isaac's confession.

Vinny did what I never thought he would do. He leaned closer to me and kissed my cheek, looks of excitement passing over Dana, Hadley, and Archie's faces, before heading into the kitchen with Logan hot on his heels.

**

Hi everyone!

So... that happened. What did you think about Carson coming out? And his friends reactions? What about Isaac's coming out and his confession about Vinny? Did you see that coming? How do you think their relationship will be now that Carson's friends know?

26

Vinny Taylor

"Why didn't you tell me about Isaac?" was the first thing Carson said to me once we were alone in his room after his friends had left to nurse their hangovers.

After hearing all the commotion downstairs this morning, I knew that would be what was stuck in his mind. My first instinct was to sneak out the window and avoid the confrontation downstairs at all costs. The second thought I had as I moved toward the window was that if I did that, any trust between Carson and me that we had built would be gone.

He didn't like when I ran from him and I was... trying. Trying to be the boyfriend he deserved. So I went down there to be as strong as I could for him. Even if all I really wanted to do was hide.

My time with Isaac had been casual with no emotion. He had been at the house one day when I thought I was alone and saw me with one of my hookups. Instead of being weird about it, he was just curious and at the time I was fucking anyone who was willing, so one thing led to another and we started hooking up.

It was fun but fleeting. It didn't last long and neither of us were hung up on it.

"Why do you think?" I asked him, raising my eyebrows. "He wasn't out yet."

Carson looked frustrated as both of his hands pulled at his hair and he paced the room.

"Look, Carson, I've fucked a lot of guys," I admitted with a deadpanned expression and he didn't look at me. "I kinda went crazy this summer. But I

don't tell you about them because none of them are out and they don't matter to me anyway."

"A lot?" Carson muttered, sending me a wide eyed gaze that made me feel like shit.

All I could do was nod and look away from him. I didn't want him to know the amount of guys I had been with over the summer. I didn't want to have to see that look of disappointment.

"I'm sorry," Carson said, his voice stronger now, back to how he usually sounded. "I'm not judging you. It's none of my business. I'm just frustrated. Why wouldn't Isaac tell me?"

That I couldn't answer for him. Isaac never struck me as a coward. He was actually quite unapologetic. Keeping his connection to me a secret from Carson, when he knew I wouldn't say anything in order to protect the secret of his sexuality, was messed up. But I was sure he had his reasons.

"Maybe he just didn't want to freak you out," I said with a shrug, walking over to him and wrapping my arms around his waist.

Carson sighed and leaned into my touch, throwing and arm around my shoulders.

"I just wish he would have told me when he found out about us," he said and I leaned my head on him and hummed in agreement.

Whatever Isaac's reasons were for not telling Carson were his and I didn't want to end up in the middle of a fight between the two of them. The thought of them being in an argument because Isaac and I slept together made me feel all sorts of strange. I knew I wouldn't be able to deal with that.

"What did Logan say to you when he followed you in the kitchen?" Carson asked me after a few moments of the two of us standing in each other's arms in silence.

I let out a low, steady breath. The topic of Logan only soured my mood further.

"Just getting in my business where he doesn't belong," I said as I thought back on our conversation in the kitchen.

*

"What exactly is going on with you two?" Logan asked as soon as the two of us were alone.

"What the fuck do you think?" I snapped. "We're dating, Logan."

I helped myself to a water from the fridge before leaning back against the counter in front of my brother. He stared back at me with a conflicting expression. It was like he didn't know how to express what he felt.

"Do you think you're ready for a relationship?" he asked after a few moments with no words between us.

I shot him a nasty glare and crossed my arms over my chest.

"It's none of your fucking business!" I nearly shouted. "Don't you think I know myself better than you do?"

"I just don't want you to end up hurt, Vin," he said. "And I don't want Carson end up hurt either."

"You think I'll hurt him." It wasn't a question. That was exactly what he thought.

"It's not that I think you'll intentionally hurt him," Logan started with a heavy sigh. "But you know you still have some stuff to work through, you go through depressive episodes that Carson will not know how to handle."

Logan was just telling me what I already knew, what caused me to try to stay away from Carson in the first place. It was one thing to inherently know it and another to have your brother say it to your face.

"So I should just stay alone because people won't know how to handle me?" I hissed, bracing myself back against the counter.

"God, no, Vinny," Logan said, sending me a look of disbelief. "I'm not saying that."

"Then what are you saying?"

"You need to work on taking care of yourself," he continued. "And be upfront with Carson about your struggles."

Logan didn't even know the half of my struggles. He thought I had just somehow caught depression after he walked in on me and I came out. And because I was an ass, I was going to let him believe that.

"Carson already knows I have issues, and for some reason, he still likes me."

"Okay and just how long did you plan to keep this from me?" Logan asked, his tone accusatory.

"Until Carson was ready to come out," I snapped. "You don't get it do you? He was scared to come out, Logan. This wasn't just us deliberately keeping shit from you."

"And what about with Isaac? Were you going to keep that a secret forever too?"

"They both weren't out, Logan!" I threw my hands in the air in annoyance. "And does it really fucking matter to you that much who I fuck?"

"Well it seems like you've fucked a lot of people."

"So what?" I hissed. "Sorry I'm not you and haven't been with the same person I lost my virginity to for years."

" Vinny, it can be dangerous to have a lot of sex if you're not being safe," Logan started. "And if you're using it as a coping mechanism? That's just as bad."

"Oh my God, stop talking about my sex life," I said, shooting him a look of disgust. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm allowed to look out for you," he replied, raising his eyebrows at me. "You're my brother."

"You can do that without being fucking intrusive and weird."

"I just want you to be careful," Logan said before turning on his heel and walking out of the kitchen.

*

"Do you think Logan's pissed?" Carson asked, peeling me away from my thoughts.

"He'll get over it," I said with a shrug. "He's just sulking because we didn't tell him. Don't worry about it."

Carson nodded and pulled away from me.

"I'm sorry that everything happened like that," Carson said, looking away from me.

"Are you mad about me and Isaac?" I asked him, suspicion lacing my tone. I didn't want *this* to be what caused a rift between the two of us.

"Not mad," he said, sitting down at the edge of his bed. "Just sort of... I don't know. Freaked out?"

I walked over to him and placed myself down on his lap so that I was straddling his hips. He looked up at me from where I sat as I put my arms around his neck. His expression was waiting, excited, like his only thoughts were about me and what I would do next.

"Would you feel better if I distracted you?" I whispered, my lips brushing against his ear.

Carson choked out a small "Yeah," his voice cracking at the word.

I brought my lips down to his jaw, my fingers tangling in the hair at the base of his neck. Carson let out a groan as I let my teeth skim over his skin before bringing my lips to his. He let my tongue slip into his mouth as I ground my hips down on his. He groaned again and I nearly came undone at the sound.

***

Carson Hughes

To say school on Monday with my friends was awkward would be a complete and utter understatement. Dana, Hadley, Archie, and Darren were speaking among each other like they didn't even notice the tension between Logan, Isaac, and me.

I hadn't spoken to Logan or Isaac since they were at my house the day before and I wasn't looking forward to the moment I had to talk to either of them about what had happened. There were obviously things left unsaid and we needed to clear the air between us before things could go back to normal. But it wouldn't bother me if we put that off for a few more days.

I hopped out of my seat as soon as the first bell rang and didn't even wait for Isaac before I took off toward English class.

"Carson, hold up," Isaac said, catching up to me. I mustered up the best smile I could at that moment before turning to face him.

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to avoid me forever?" he asked with an almost stern expression. He was never one to be too serious about anything.

This was not where I wanted to be having this conversation.

"I'm not avoiding you," I said with a sigh. "I... I just need some time to process."

If he looked hurt by that, his face didn't show it. He just nodded and the two of us walked into the English classroom together where Vinny already

occupied his usual seat.

Knowing about what had happened between the two of them had finally made Isaac's strange behavior toward Vinny make sense. He hadn't wanted to sit near him in English on the first day and made up some stupid excuse about it. Now I knew he actually didn't want to sit near him because the two of them had history. Or, he didn't want anybody knowing the two of them had history.

It was hard for me not to be angry with Isaac. Part of me felt justified with my anger while the other, larger, part of me felt as though my anger was misplaced. It was quite clear to me that the only reason he ended up coming out and admitting his connection to Vinny was because my coming out and confession about Vinny hadn't gone according to plan. He did it so I wouldn't be alone and so Logan's anger wouldn't fall solely on me, yet I still felt somewhat betrayed by Isaac.

It wasn't that I was angry about his past with Vinny; it was the fact that he knew I was with Vinny and still didn't tell me about it. But who knows how I would have reacted if he had. Maybe I wouldn't have pursued Vinny. Maybe him telling me at that moment would have been worse than this.

And although I wanted to get my mind off this, it is exactly what I brought up to Vinny when the two of us were sitting in the locker room for lunch. Now that my friends knew about the two of us, I didn't even bother going to the lunch room to make up some excuse and instead went straight for the locker room.

"Do you think it's bad that I'm mad at Isaac?" I asked him as he munched on his carrot sticks.

He chewed slowly as he looked over at me. "I don't know."

I let out a groan. "I just— I don't know why he didn't tell me sooner."

"Would it have even mattered?" Vinny asked, plopping another carrot into his mouth. "Or would you have just felt this way no matter when he decided to tell you?"

"I don't know." I truly didn't. That was my problem.

"I think you would have," he said. "That's kinda how you are."

"Thanks."

Vinny rolled his eyes and put his food aside before sliding over to me on the bench, his legs on either side of the bench as he sat in front of me.

"I know I'm not one to talk," Vinny started, his hands resting on my thighs. "But you tend to overthink."

"I know."

"And I don't know how to help you so I just distract you with my lips," he said with a grin forming on his face.

"I like your lips," I said with a grin of my own, reaching around his waist to pull him closer to me. Vinny was practically in my lap at this point, his face close to mine.

And then I was hit with the thought of Vinny's lips on Isaac's. On his neck, on his chest, lower and lower on his body.

I let out a loud groan and backed away from Vinny, a bewildered look taking over his face.

"I really need to make things right with Isaac otherwise he's going to be all I think about when I'm with you."

Vinny's expression turned from one of bewilderment to one of disgust in a split second.

"What the fuck, Carson," he said, shaking his head. "That's such a fucking mood ruiner, you know that?"

"I know," I said in an apologetic tone.

"You need to talk to him *today* then," Vinny said, picking his food back up from where he placed it on the bench. "Because I really don't want to talk about me fucking Isaac anymore."

"You're right," I told him with a nod. I really didn't want to talk about that anymore either. "I'll talk to him today."

**

Hi everyone!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter. What did you think about Vinny's conversation with Logan? And Vinny's reasoning for not telling him about Isaac? How do you think talking with Isaac will go?

27

Carson Hughes

I didn't end up being able to talk to Isaac alone until Thursday. I had spent most of the week away from my friends and perhaps the space was needed. Logan and Dana spent time together while Hadley was with Darren, Archie was with Crystal, and I spent my afternoons with Vinny. Isaac was MIA for most of that time.

It wasn't until I cornered him in the hall after English class on Thursday that I was able to invite him over my house for the afternoon so the two of us could talk. Then during gym class that same day, I finally had a normal conversation with Logan that wasn't strained or awkward.

"He really just doesn't know what to do with us, huh?" Logan said as the two of us started walking the track for class.

Coach Bronson tended to just send us out on the track when it was nice enough out because he couldn't be bothered to actually plan out class for us. Since it was nearing the end of October, nice, mild temperature days were sandwiched between days of bitter cold and autumn breezes. It wouldn't be long before the coach couldn't just send us outside when he didn't know what to do with us.

"I think he just doesn't care enough," I replied, looking ahead to see Vinny running at the front of the pack. He had been running more often now and getting back into the shape that he was before he lost all that weight over the summer. He was building lean muscle and getting faster and faster.

"Vinny enjoys it," Logan said, his eyes following mine. "I'm sure this is what he prefers to actually having to play on a team. He's always been like that."

It surprised me that Logan even brought his brother up, but his tone was casual and the bitterness he spoke with before, back when he found out

about the two of us, was missing.

"He's been running a lot more lately," I told him.

Logan nodded, his gaze following his brother as he got further from us.

"I think that's at least partially because of you," Logan said, catching me off guard. "And the whole hospital thing when the doctor told him he needs to gain weight, but also you."

"Why me?"

"Because he likes you?" Logan said as if he was stating the obvious. "He wants to be his best for you."

I didn't know how to feel about that. I'd rather Vinny want to be the best for himself.

"Which is kinda why I freaked out the other day," Logan continued. "I don't want this to end badly and then have him end up losing all the progress he's made. He's doing good."

"I don't want it to end badly either," I said after Vinny passed us, now on his second lap before we finished our first. "But if for some reason it does, we're just going to have to trust the progress he made will keep him from falling back."

Logan nodded and hummed in agreement. "Are you going to come over today?"

I hadn't been over there since the week before and it was strange to even think Logan had to ask that question.

"I can't, Isaac's coming over," I said.

Logan let out a low whistle, sending me an awkward smile. "Good luck with that."

"Have you talked to him since Sunday?" I wondered.

"Yeah, I mean there's really no hard feelings," Logan said with a shrug. "I was just shocked when it all came out, no pun intended. And I was worried for Vinny."

And I really couldn't blame him for that. I knew how much Logan cared for his brother, even if they way he showed that care was questionable at times.

When school finally ended, I went home and waited for Isaac to show up at my door. The wait seemed agonizing and I couldn't tell if it was because I was dreading Isaac coming over or worried he wouldn't show up.

Just as I pondered on this, I saw his car pull up to the curb. If Isaac was at all nervous about this conversation, he didn't show it. He hopped out the car and walked straight up to my door without any hesitation. It was me who hesitated when he knocked on my door.

I let out a deep breath before opening the door.

"Hey," Isaac greeted, his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt.

"Hey," I mumbled a reply, stepping aside to let him in.

Isaac walked in like there was no awkward tension in the air, like we were just two friends hanging out. I didn't know whether to be glad for that or annoyed.

The two of us sat down on opposite ends of the couch, Isaac leaning back and getting comfortable while I sat rigid in my seat and stared at him. I didn't know how to start this conversation and part of me wanted to forget about it all together.

But I knew I couldn't do that. I had to know why Isaac kept this from me and I had to be sure that if he ever had any feelings for Vinny, they were gone.

"Look," Isaac started before I built up the courage to say anything. "I get why you're mad at me about the whole Vinny thing."

"I wouldn't say mad," I told him truthfully. Mad wasn't the first emotion that came to mind when I thought of our scenario. More like uncomfortable or unnerved.

"Well, you're not happy with me," he said. "And I get it. It's weird for you and it came out in a weird way in front of all our friends."

I nodded as he glanced over at me and for the first time he seemed to acknowledge the tension between us.

"I just don't get why you didn't tell me as soon as you knew I had something going on with him," I said before I could convince myself not to say it. It was what I had been thinking and it needed to be said.

"Because I didn't want to make it weird for you," Isaac said. "But I ended up making it weird for you anyway."

I didn't say anything, willing him to continue.

"And when I said it the other day it was because I didn't want to just stand there and watch Logan get angry with you when I'm guilty of the same thing. It was awkward and maybe I shouldn't have done it, but I didn't want you to have to be alone in that moment."

It was exactly what I had suspected. I knew Isaac's intentions with the whole ordeal weren't malicious. He wanted to support me in anyway that he could and I couldn't justify being angry with him for that.

"And with Vinny—" I started, pausing for a moment to gather my thoughts. "You're not— you're not still into him are you?"

"God, Carson, no," Isaac said with a laugh. "Vinny and I were never dating or anything. It was just sex and it ended before you were even back from the camp. I swear it."

I let out a deep breath. "Okay."

"And I'm sorry for how you found out," Isaac said. "I should have told you, just you, before everyone else, but I panicked and blurted it out."

"I get why you did it," I said, my voice low. "And I do appreciate you being there for me." Even if it was in the most awkward way imaginable. I would just have to move on and stop letting it bother me.

"I mean, yeah, we've both slept with Logan's brother so it was hard to watch him get mad at you over it."

My face paled. "Well, uh, Vinny and I... we haven't... you know."

Isaac's eyes widened and his mouth fell open at my revelation, but he quickly composed himself and tried to appear casual.

"You haven't?"

I shook my head with a grimace. "And I don't know if it's because of something I'm doing or what."

It had occurred to me that this was most likely the bigger issue with the way I felt about the Isaac and Vinny situation. The two of them were hooking up over the summer and Vinny and I were dating now with no sex involved. It made me insecure, though I didn't want to admit that even to myself.

"So you're for it and he's not?" Isaac asked.

"We haven't really talked about it," I told him. "But I'm definitely for it."

It felt simultaneously awkward and relieving to talk about this with Isaac. I couldn't talk about it with anyone else. I would rather die than talk about it with Logan, Dana and Hadley would mean well but be no help, and Archie wouldn't take it seriously. It wasn't ideal to talk about it with someone who has had sex with my boyfriend, but Isaac was undoubtedly the most level-headed person out of all of my friends.

"Maybe he's just trying to take it slow with you," Isaac suggested. "I mean he's done the hook up thing, he probably doesn't want to go to fast and ruin anything you guys have."

"It's not like deal breaker or anything," I quickly added. "But it makes me feel, sort of, insecure I guess?"

"Don't take this the wrong way," Isaac started, turning more toward me. "But have you had sex with a guy?"

I snorted out a laugh despite how uncomfortable I felt. "Yes, I've had sex with a guy."

"Seriously?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "A guy from summer camp."

"So you did get with a lifeguard?" Isaac smirked.

I rolled my eyes. "No, it was another counselor."

"Does Vinny know you've had sex with a guy?" Isaac asked, raising his eyebrows.

"We haven't talked about it."

"Maybe that's it then," he said with a shrug. "He thinks you've never been with a guy and doesn't wanna rush you."

"You think?" I asked. "Should I tell him? Or, like, hint at it?"

"Probably better to be upfront about it," Isaac replied. "That's what I would do."

"You're probably right," I agreed.

"So are we good now?" Isaac asked, leaning back in his seat.

I nodded. "Yeah, we're good."

We were truly never *not* good. It was just an uncomfortable situation that I would have to learn to live with.

Luckily, the two of us were done with this conversation and Isaac had suggested the two of us go over Logan's where the rest of our friends were.

"I'm just going to go see Vinny first," I told Isaac as we walked up to the house. He nodded and made his way down to the basement where we could hear the chatter of our friends.

I walked up the stairs and went straight for Vinny's bedroom. I knocked, though I knew he wouldn't answer, and went to let myself in the room, but the door wouldn't open. I pushed on it harder, but it was locked, so I knocked again.

"Vin?" I called out, tapping my knuckles on the door. "Are you in there?"

There was still no answer. His car had been in the driveway when I pulled up, but it was possible he had gone out on a run and I didn't know if it was normal for him to lock his door when he wasn't home. I turned away from the door and went back down the stairs and to the basement to greet my friends.

To my surprise, Darren occupied a spot on the couch, playing a video game with Archie and Hadley. Hadley didn't like to show it much, but she loved to game and her and Archie went at each other's throats in various games all the time.

"Hey, is Vinny home?" I asked Logan once I sent a wave to everyone, sitting down beside him.

"Yeah, he was," Logan said. "Unless he left between getting home from school and now."

"Oh, his door is locked."

Logan glanced at me with a teasing gleam in his eyes. "What did you do to piss him off?"

"Nothing!" I quickly denied. "At least I think I didn't."

"I'm just messing with you," he replied, lightly shoving my shoulder. "Sometimes he just doesn't want anyone to bother him. He just needs space."

Although I knew that was true about Vinny, I couldn't help but worry about him, so I sent him a text.

To: Vinvin

hey are you okay?

I stared at my phone and waited for his response until Darren called out to me and grabbed my attention.

"Hm?" I answered.

"You want to play a round?" Darren asked, gesturing toward the TV.

I shook my head. "No, I'm good."

"Hadley let me play and she destroyed me," Dana told me from the other side of Logan.

I laughed. "She destroys everyone."

"Not me!" Archie exclaimed as they restarted their game as a two-player between he and Hadley.

"So is everything good with you and Isaac?" Dana asked in a low tone, leaning over Logan so she could speak quietly to me.

"Yeah, we're good," I said. "Just had to talk through it I guess."

Dana nodded. "Good, I would've hated if that got between you two. When are you and Vinny gonna come on a date with me and Logan?"

Logan shot her a strange look while I just chuckled at her serious expression.

"I don't know," I said. "The two of us don't really go on dates." I couldn't really tell if that was just because we were keeping our relationship a secret or if Vinny and I just really didn't care for dates. I would have to ask him.

"You guys don't go on dates?" Logan asked, now directing his strange look at me.

"Well, we kinda went on one," I replied, remembering the night in the park. "And then the night at my house you ruined was kinda one too."

"Let's just forget that night," Logan suggested. "And the morning after."

"Come on," Dana started with a laugh. "Now that everything is good, it's kinda funny if you think about it."

"Too soon," Logan told her with a serious expression. I couldn't help but agree with him.

It was then that my phone buzzed with Vinny's response.

From: Vinvin

just want to be alone. don't come up here

I let out a sigh and slid my phone into my pocket. I knew there were times that Vinny truly needed to be alone, but that didn't stop me from thinking about every possible thing I could have done wrong to make him upset with me. Maybe he was upset because I hadn't gotten over the Isaac thing when I last saw him. Or maybe it was something I wasn't even aware of, though I knew neither thing was true.

He had explained it to me before, when he came to my house after yelling at me in his room. I knew he went through things that he couldn't control. It pained me that there was nothing I could do to help him through it other than give him his space and let it pass.

I wanted nothing more than to go up to his room and lay behind him in his bed, holding him as he worked through whatever emotions he was feeling. But I knew that wouldn't help him and that there was actually nothing I could do.

It made me feel completely powerless.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter. What did you think about Carson's conversations with Logan and Isaac? Do you think things are still awkward? What about what happened with Vinny afterward?

28

Vinny Taylor

Things were always simpler outside, in the park, in the tree. My feet dangled from where I sat on the branch and my eyes caught a figure coming toward me. I was relieved when I realized it was Carson. My guilt had eaten at me after shutting him out earlier in the night while he was at my house. Out here at the park, I couldn't shut him out. And I didn't want to.

Carson immediately started climbing the tree to get to me. He had done better this time around than the time before and climbed it quicker than I thought he would, giving me less time to think of what I wanted to say to him.

When I texted him to meet me here, his response was immediate, like he had been waiting by the phone for me or staring at it thinking of something to say to me. I hated thinking about the stress I caused him.

"Are you alright?" he asked me, pulling himself onto the branch and shifting so he was right next to me with his hands clutching the branch for dear life.

"Not really," I said. I didn't want to lie to him or hide from him. "Just don't feel my best today."

I was surprised I was even allowing myself to say that to him. Part of me wanted to hide the dark parts of me so that he would never have to experience them, but I knew that would be impossible. And if I kept him in the dark about it, it would only leave him hurt and confused. And possibly resentful.

"You know you can talk to me about anything," Carson replied, sliding his hand to go over mine. His hand was warm over my ice cold one, evidence that I had been outside for too long. "Your hand is freezing," he said.

"I know," I replied, looking down at our hands. "There's really nothing to talk about. It's just one of those days."

My half-truths to him wouldn't be able to last long, but there was only so much vulnerability I could show without baring myself to him and leaving myself defenseless. I wanted to tell myself that the walls I built around me protected me. That was how I justified this anyway.

Carson's thumb started moving over the back of my hand. He had a contemplative look on his face, like he was deciding on whether to speak, or, what to speak about.

"My mom wants to have you over for dinner some time," he said after a few moments of silence. "I told her that it might be too early for that, but I'd talk to you about it."

The truth of the matter was, no time would be enough time for me to prepare to have dinner with Carson's mother. I would be stressed out over it no matter what.

"Do you think that's something you'd wanna do?" he asked after I didn't say anything.

"Yeah, I mean, yes I—" I paused. "I want to, I just don't want her to think I'm not good for you or anything."

Carson shot me a puzzled look. "Why would she think that?"

I raised my eyebrows at him. "Because you're you and I'm me."

Carson let out a laugh and shook his head at me. "Yes, very good Vin, you're you and I'm me."

"I'm serious," I told him, my lips turned in a frown.

"So am I," Carson replied. "She already knows you, and likes you, so it's not some formal thing or her trying to decide if you're good for me or not. She just wants to see you."

"When did you tell her about us?"

"I didn't really have to tell her," he said. "She just kinda knew."

"And she's okay with it?"

Carson chuckled. "She's more than okay with it."

I let out a content sigh and leaned closer to Carson, resting my head on his shoulder.

"Thanks for asking me to come here," Carson said after a few moments of silence. "I know it was probably hard for you to even admit something was wrong."

Carson continued to prove just how much better he was than me and anyone else I knew. He just understood me better than I ever imagined he would. And he didn't hold it against me that I was difficult to deal with. He just got it and went with it.

Instead of reminding Carson how perfect he was, I lifted my head from his shoulder and planted a kiss on his mouth that became slower and deeper. I didn't time it this time, mostly, because I didn't want it to end.

But it did end. And we walked back to Carson's house so that he could drive me home. When we got to my house, I didn't want to leave him, but I leaned over the center console and pecked him on the lips, promising to see him the next day before I got out of the car and walked around the house to climb up to my window.

I nearly fell out of the window as I climbed through. My dad was sitting on my bed, reading one of my books. My heart pounded, startled to see him there. He turned to face me as I stepped into the room.

"How was your night?" he asked, raising his eyebrows at me.

"Fine," I muttered, turning to close the window then standing before him as he closed the book and put it down on my bed.

"Where'd you go?"

I let out a sigh as he continued staring at me with a stern expression. It was obvious he wasn't happy with me for sneaking out and I was sure he would waste no time letting me know that.

"Just to the park," I replied, awkwardly scratching the back of my neck.

"You decided that would be a good idea to go out at midnight on a school night?"

"I never said it was a *good* idea."

Dad narrowed his expression at me and sat up on the bed, patting the space beside him for me to sit. I obliged and looked straight ahead as he stared at the side of my face. I mentally cursed at myself for forgetting to lock my bedroom door.

"Do you do this often?" he asked me after a brief moment of quiet between us.

"I don't know Dad, sometimes I guess," I told him, my tone exasperated.

"I'm just trying to figure out why you feel the need to sneak out," he retorted in a hard tone.

I couldn't exactly tell him that sometimes it felt like he and Mom were suffocating me. They wanted me to get out more, but they didn't at the same time, and I knew that. They still forced me to be home every night for dinner and they still watched me like a hawk whenever I was near them. They wanted me to be back to normal, but they didn't want me out of their sight.

"Sometimes I just need to get out, Dad," I said with a sigh.

"Not at midnight on a school night," he said. "Not without letting us know where you're going."

"Do you always know where Logan is?" I snapped. Because I knew the answer: he didn't.

"We're not talking about Logan, we're talking about you," Dad retorted and I could feel him getting more and more annoyed with me.

It was different with Logan because they didn't see him as fragile as they saw me. He was their normal son and I was the son with issues that needed to be constantly watched or something bad would happen or whatever they thought. It was exhausting.

"I don't even know what to do with you because grounding you and forcing you to stay home is the opposite of what I want to do," Dad sighed, running a hand through his hair. It wasn't like that would help anyway. I would just sneak out if I really wanted to and he knew that.

"You could just pretend this never happened," I suggested and he let out a snort, glancing over at me with a small grin.

"That would be convenient for you."

"And for you," I said.

Dad shook his head. "No, because I would still have the knowledge that you're God knows where in the middle of the night and it would stress me the fuck out like it is right now."

"I'm not kidding, I was just at the park with Carson," I admitted before realizing what I had just done.

His eyebrows shot up on his forehead and he sent me a look of confusion.

"With Carson?"

It would be easy to lie and tell him that we were just friends and the two of us hung out on occasion, but with Logan and all his friends knowing about my relationship, it was only a matter of time before my parents found out about it. Carson had already mentioned telling my parents, but I had

brushed him off because I didn't want to deal with it. Who knew if Logan would keep his big mouth shut about it anyway.

"Yeah," I said, clearing my throat and avoiding eye contact with my father. "Yeah, we're kinda together."

"Together?"

"Dating."

Dad stared at me as if taking a moment to register what I had just said. I was even surprised at myself for admitting this to him, not knowing how he would react.

"Since when?" he asked.

"About a month."

He just stared at me again.

"Does Logan know?"

I nodded.

I could tell he wanted to say more, but he was biting his tongue which wasn't like him at all. He usually said exactly how he felt.

"When were you going to tell me this?" he asked, his voice quieter than it was before.

"I don't know, Dad," I told him, letting out a deep breath. "Whenever we were both ready."

"Well now that I know this you don't have to sneak out, just tell me where you're going when you leave the house."

With that, he got up from the bed and left the room.

***

I arrived home from school on Friday afternoon to all of Logan and all his friends sitting in the living room. Dana was practically sitting on Logan's lap on the loveseat while Archie sat next to them. Isaac, Hadley, and Carson were sitting on the couch. Carson smiled at me when I entered the room and I walked over to where he sat on the couch to kiss his cheek. Archie let out a low whistle, earning a shove from Logan.

"Wanna come upstairs?" I asked in a whisper as I leaned down to talk into Carson's ear.

Carson eagerly moved to stand up and follow me before Hadley's voice stopped us.

"Aren't you two going to hang out with us?" she asked. "I'm going to kick Archie's ass in some games. It'll be fun."

Archie scoffed. "You're not going to kick my ass. Let them go have sex upstairs." That earned him another shove from Logan.

"We'll come back down in a little bit," Carson promised her before grabbing my hand and bringing me up to my room. I hoped he didn't expect me to go hang out with his friends later, but I knew I would if he just asked.

"I don't know how you deal with Archie," I told Carson once we were in my room. "He's fucking annoying." I set my backpack down on the floor against my nightstand as Carson laid down on my bed and watched me.

"You get used to it," he said with a laugh. "He's not so bad."

I kicked my shoes off and got on the bed, sitting over Carson's hips. I leaned down and placed my lips over his. Carson's lips moved slowly, staying closed and not allowing me to deepen the kiss. I pulled away and sat up, giving him a strange look.

"Are you okay?" I asked him. "Did you not want to make out?"

"No, I do," he said, sitting up and leaning against the headboard. "I just have something on my mind I guess."

"What?"

Dread immediately filled my thoughts. I could only think of Carson second guessing our relationship and him finally realizing I wasn't at all as good for him as he was for me. I didn't think I could handle that rejection.

Carson stared at me for a moment and placed his hands on the tops of my thighs, rubbing his thumbs over me as if noticing my panic and trying to calm me down.

"You know I'm not a virgin right?" he rushed out, looking down at his hands to avoid eye contact with me.

I nearly choked at his words. That had not been what I expected him to say, though I should have known this topic would come up eventually.

"Why the hell are you saying that?" I asked, trying to force my eyes away from him, but they stayed on his face against my will.

"Because," he started, sitting up straighter. "I didn't know if that was clear and if you thought I was and that's why we haven't..."

I hated this. I wished that was the reason Carson and I hadn't had sex and I didn't know how to explain to him that it wasn't. I felt stuck, knowing I couldn't tell him the whole truth without opening up a part of me that I wanted to keep hidden away for as long as I could.

A deep breath released from my mouth as I got off Carson's lap and stood from the bed, going over to the window sill and opening the window before pulling a cigarette out from the pack in my pocket and lighting it. I sat down on the window sill, faced away from Carson as he moved toward the edge of the bed.

"Vin?"

"I'm sorry," I said, taking a drag from the cigarette and blowing out the smoke.

"For what?"

I made the mistake of glancing at him and seeing the look of concern on his face. He was too fucking perfect. Always kind and considerate and worried about me. If only I deserved him.

"I know it sounds like a bullshit excuse," I started, taking another drag. "But it's me, not you."

"What do you mean?" he asked, leaning further off the bed as if trying to get closer to me while also wanting to give me space.

"We haven't... done *that* because of my issues," I told him. "Not because I thought you were a virgin or something."

He paused for a moment, registering my words.

"What issues?" he wondered, his head tilting to the side with a curious expression on his face.

My face flushed, suddenly feeling ashamed. I wanted to be able to be vulnerable with him because it felt like he was an open book, trusting me with every part of him, and I hid away. I turned and looked out the window as I finished my cigarette and then put it in the ash tray.

"It's... it's, uh—" I started, still looking out the window. "It's hard for me to, you know, *get hard* ."

He was silent for a moment and I didn't have it in me to face him.

"Like at all," I continued. "Not because of you. It's been hard for me for a while."

"Oh."

I still couldn't look at him.

"Do you know why?" he asked.

"No."

My voice cracked. I finally turned to look at him and his kind face. I was glad I didn't see that look of disappointment, but the look of concern was almost just as bad.

"I don't mean to disappoint you—" I began.

"You're not disappointing me," he assured me with a serious expression that quickly turned into a smile. "I'm just glad we cleared that up."

I returned a tight smile.

"And if you ever want to try to fix that, I can see what I can do." His grin widened.

I threw my head back, letting out a loud laugh at his words. His smile was infectious, causing mine to meet my eyes.

I stood from the window sill and immediately went to Carson, straddling his hips and pushing him back on the bed, continuing what we had started earlier.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for being so patient while I took a break from this to focus on my finals. I appreciate it :)

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! What did you think about Carson and Vinny meeting up in the park? And Vinny telling Jeff about him and Carson? What about Carson and Vinny's conversation at the end?

29

Carson Hughes

As I was leaving the Taylor's house that evening, I was stopped by Jeff outside in the driveway.

"Hey Carson," he said as he walked out of the open garage door. I stopped and turned to face him. Jeff stopped in front of me, his lips pressed tightly together as he seemed to be debating something in his mind.

"Hi Jeff," I said to break the silence. He stood straighter, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared at me.

There was a tension in the air that I couldn't quite place. I had never felt this way with Jeff before. It felt like I was his child and he was about to chastise me. Jeff *was* like a father to me, but never in this way.

"I talked to Vinny last night, well early this morning," Jeff started. Somehow I knew exactly what this had to be about and I wasn't looking forward to the conversation about to be had. "Do you know what this is about?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "I have a pretty good idea."

"So know I'm not angry with you and that I'm not going to go all protective dad mode on you," Jeff replied, appearing to relax a bit which did nothing to ease my own nerves.

But there was nothing I could do other than stand there and listen to what Jeff had to say. Even if I'd rather be swallowed whole by a hole in the earth than go through this conversation with my boyfriend's father.

"You know Vinny's, uh, he's a little sensitive. And moody," Jeff continued, talking slowly as if carefully choosing his words. "And you're a lot more... out there than he is. With your social life and friends and stuff like that."

The conversation hadn't taken off in the direction I had thought it would, but I still felt as thought I knew where it was going. He wanted to make sure I wasn't going to hurt his son, much like how Logan reacted when he found out. I couldn't really blame him for it.

"I get it, Jeff," I said with a nod. "You want to make sure I'm aware of how Vinny is and that I won't hurt him. I already know and I won't."

"That wasn't what I was going to say," Jeff replied, pressing his lips tightly together for a moment. "I know you won't hurt him. I'm not worried about that."

I sent him a look of confusion. I had no idea what else he could possibly have to say to me about my relationship with Vinny that was making him act this way.

Jeff's expression looked guilty and I nodded, urging him to continue.

"I'm more worried about him hurting you," Jeff admitted.

I could barely believe the words even as they processes in my mind. It was like he blindsided me and left me winded at those words. Never would I have ever expected Jeff to be worried for *my* sake over Vinny's.

"What do you mean?" I asked him, trying not to snap at him. I couldn't explain the annoyance I felt at what Jeff had said.

"I'm just saying you need to be careful," he replied. "Vinny won't mean it but he has an edge to him that might end up with you being hurt."

I didn't say anything, still feeling uncomfortable with the conversation we were having.

"Or maybe I'm also saying you should reconsider."

" *What?"* I hissed. The blazing anger I felt at that moment was an emotion I never felt with Jeff and it left me wondering if I had even heard him correctly.

"It's not too late for you to back out with little damage done," Jeff responded, holding his arms out as if he was presenting a grand idea. "You're not too invested at this point."

I couldn't even find the proper words to respond with. My anger was bubbling over in my mind and all I wanted to do was scream at him. My hands clenched at my sides so hard I thought I'd break my fingers.

"Jeff, I—" I paused, taking a deep breath to calm myself down. "I *am* invested. I can't do that. I won't."

"I just don't want you to end up heartbroken, Carson," Jeff replied, stepping closer to me. "Vinny's not... very stable."

I shook my head at him and started backing away.

"I know you like him, and I cannot think of a better person for my son to be with," he said. "But I'm warning you that this may not work out the way you hope it will. I just want you to protect yourself."

With that, I turned around and went to my car as Jeff went back into the house. I sat in the car for a moment, trying to process the conversation I just had. It didn't make sense to me. All it did was make me feel uncomfortable.

Jeff had always been like a father to me, I should have expected him to look out for me the way he had. But to do it against his own son put me in an awkward position and I was debating whether I should tell Vinny about it at all. Maybe he had said the same thing to him and it was just Jeff's way of trying to get us to break up.

Deep down I knew that wasn't the case. He had truly wished to convince me to break up with his son because he felt as though Vinny wasn't good for me. Or he thought that Vinny wasn't able to give me what I needed in a relationship.

The anger came back when I realized Jeff had no right to say that. He didn't know anything about our relationship or how the two of us worked. He didn't know that we had worked through things that caused problems for us

already and he didn't know how open and honest Vinny was becoming with me.

He thought so little of the both of us that he didn't believe we were able to work things out and actually be good for each other. Jeff thought his own son was incapable of being in a relationship.

Jeff wanted me to break up with him and for what? To isolate Vinny further? To make him feel like he was incapable of making his own decisions? The thought left a sour taste in my mouth.

When I finally let myself start the car and drive home, I made it there in silence, not even turning the radio on. My mother looked as if she was getting ready to leave when I arrived.

"Carson, I'm going to Paul's for dinner. Do you want to come?" she asked.

I wanted to say no, but the hopeful look on my mother's face told me that she wanted me to come. And I couldn't say no to her, so I turned around and got into the passenger's seat of her car.

"Did you ask Vinny about coming to dinner some time?" Mom asked as she pulled out of the driveway.

I nodded before leaning my head on the window. "Yeah, he wants to."

"Great!" she exclaimed, looking at me briefly. Her smile fell. "What's wrong?"

I couldn't lie to her.

"I just had a talk with Jeff when I was leaving the house," I told her with a sigh.

"He knows about you guys?"

"Yeah," I said. "He thinks I should break up with Vinny."

Mom let out a gasp. "Why?"

"He thinks that Vinny's going to end up breaking my heart," I explained. "It was like he thought I would just do whatever he said. He doesn't even know anything about us."

"You're right, he doesn't," Mom said. "But there's no use in getting angry at Jeff for trying to look out for you."

"Looking out for me over his own son?"

"He's trying to look out for both of you, even if it doesn't seem that way," she responded. "But he doesn't know anything about you two and if it does end in heartbreak, that's just part of life. You'll survive it."

"He shouldn't have even said anything at all," I muttered, crossing my arms over my chest. He had no business doing that and although my mother told me not to, I couldn't help but be angry with him.

"Maybe he shouldn't have," she agreed. "But fathers have this need to protect their kids and he sees you as his son. I'm not saying he should have done it, but that's why he did. He doesn't want you or Vinny to be hurt."

"So he wants me to hurt Vinny by breaking up with him because his dad told me to?"

Mom chuckled. "I never said it made sense. But in his mind it does."

We pulled up to Paul's house quicker than I thought we would. I hadn't realized that he lived so close to us. Mom and I got out of the car and walked up to the house where Paul immediately opened the door and greeted us like he had been watching through the window for us to arrive.

"Carson, I'm so glad you made it!" Paul said, clapping a hand down on my shoulder.

"Thanks for having me."

"You can go on up to Spencer's room while I finish up dinner," he offered. "He's the last door in the hall upstairs."

Although I would have preferred not to invite myself into Spencer's room, I went up the stairs and to the last door anyway and knocked my knuckles against it. Spencer let out a "come in" and I opened the door, revealing Spencer and Marina sitting on the bed. I hadn't seen Marina since she had gone with Spencer to visit Vinny at the hospital.

"Oh, hey," Spencer said, ignoring the look of confusion on Marina's face.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you, Carson, but why are you here?" Marina asked as I stepped further into the room and shut the door behind me.

"Oh my dad's dating his mom," Spencer told her as I took a seat on his desk chair.

"What?" she asked, looking at each of us. "Since when?"

I shrugged. "For a couple months I think? They were keeping it quiet for a while."

"So you two are going to end up being step brothers," Marina said with a light chuckle.

"Potentially," Spencer responded.

I took a moment to look around Spencer's room. The wall across from his bed was covered from the ceiling to the floor in pictures. Some were nature shots, others were of the night sky and stars, and quite a few of them were of Marina and Vinny.

"Did you take all these?" I asked him, standing from the desk chair and walking over to the wall of pictures.

"Uh, yeah," he said, clearing his throat.

"They're really good."

"Thanks," he said as I looked back at them. "A lot of those are old."

I looked back at the wall and my eyes landed on a picture of Vinny that looked like it was from about a year ago. His hair was a little shorter, his face a little fuller, and his eyes had a sparkle that seemed to be dimmed now.

The picture was of him sitting out on a blanket under the stars. He was looking up at the sky with a small smile on his face. Marina could be seen in the background, but the focus was on Vinny sitting under the stars with his skin glowing from the light.

"These are really good, seriously," I repeated. "How did you get into photography?"

"My mom's a photographer," he replied. "She taught me the basics."

"Does she live around here?"

"Technically, yes, but she travels a lot for work," Spencer told me. "I have to go check on her house every week."

I nodded, continuing to look at the pictures.

It was silent for a few moments before Marina started to speak up.

"So, um..." she trailed, causing me to turn my head to face her. Marina looked down at her hands in her lap before turning her gaze to me. "I know you probably don't know much, but I figured since you're friends with Logan you might know *something.* "

An expression of confusion overtook my face.

"About what?" I wondered.

"About how Vinny's doing," she said, earning an elbow to the side from Spencer. He shot her a dirty look and shook his head as if telling her not to bother me about this.

"What do you mean?" I asked, though I knew exactly what she was talking about.

"It's just—" she sighed. "We kind of had a falling out over the summer and he hasn't spoken to us since."

I knew that something had to have happened for Vinny to have become so closed off. It was possible it was caused by whatever falling out Marina was talking about, but I wasn't so sure that was the only reason.

"What happened?" I asked, though I knew I shouldn't. It was selfish of me to try to figure Vinny out through his friends.

Marina and Spencer shared a glance.

"There was just an argument between Spencer and Vinny and I kinda took Spencer's side at first," Marina started. "But I think there's more to it. I just feel like *that* wouldn't be what caused him to cut us off, you know?"

I couldn't help but agree with Marina. Even though Vinny didn't often speak of his two old friends, he didn't seem to have any resentment toward them. He just didn't want to talk about them anytime they were brought up, but he didn't seem hostile.

"So how is he doing?" Marina asked again. "Mentally and physically."

"Well, his head healed fine," I told her and paused as I thought of what to say next. "As for mentally... I don't know. He seems different but I really don't know."

Disclosing anything about my relationship with Vinny to the two of them didn't feel right. And disclosing anything Vinny had shared with me since we started dating felt even more wrong.

Spencer wasn't engaged in the conversation. Instead he was looking down at the camera in his hands and messing with the buttons. Marina's full attention was on me.

"Do you see him much?" she asked. Spencer nudged her again as if he was begging her to stop asking me questions. "Sorry, I just get worried about him."

"I see him sometimes when I'm at Logan's," was all I said.

Thankfully, we were called down to dinner after that and I no longer had to endure Marina's questioning.

I couldn't help but feel bad for her. She was sad and confused about whatever had went on with Vinny over the summer and all she wanted was some closure. But I couldn't be the person to give that to her.

And despite my curiosity, I wouldn't question Vinny about this, even if it would bring me another step closer to understanding him.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think about Jeff's conversation with Carson? Did you expect that? Do you think he's in the wrong? What about the scene with Carson, Marina, and Spencer? What do you think happened?

30

Vinny Taylor

The last time I went to the movies, it was with Spencer and Marina over the summer and none of us could pay attention because of the two people in front of us who spent the whole time making out. *Grossly making out* . The three of us tried to contain our laughter, but it didn't work. We were in stitches the whole time and missed the movie.

It was a strange memory to think back on, but I couldn't control where my thoughts went when I walked into the theater beside Carson. I didn't know how he convinced me to come here with him and his friends. It probably had something to do with how he asked me, then immediately kissed me so I couldn't say no to him.

Being the good boyfriend I was, or was trying to be, I didn't back out when Carson went up to my room on Friday night to remind me.

*

"What are you doing?" Carson asked, barging into my room. "Aren't you coming? Get dressed!"

I glanced over at him from the book I was holding above my head as I was lying on my back on the bed. Carson's eyes traveled up and down my bare chest before settling on my face with an impatient look as I tried to remember whatever it was he was talking about.

"Going where?" I asked, sitting up and setting the book aside.

"We're going out with my friends, remember?"

Oh, right. That thing I had agreed to when Carson manipulated me with his soft lips. How could I have forgotten?

I placed my book down on the nightstand then heaved myself out of bed with a drawn out sigh and opened my dresser to find clothes. I pulled a sweatshirt on over my head and changed from my pajama pants to a pair of jeans, then turned to see Carson's smiling face.

"You're not going to try to get out of this?" he asked as if he was surprised.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed onto his hand, pulling him out of the room.

"I said I'd go, didn't I?"

*

That was how I ended up at the theater half an hour later, standing beside Carson while the rest of his friends waited in the popcorn line.

"So, I was thinking you could come to dinner at my house next Friday?" Carson suggested, brushing his hand against mine.

I looked up at him and shrugged. "Sure."

Although the thought of having to sit through a whole dinner with Carson and his mom freaked the fuck out of me, I wanted to be able to just suck it up and be there for him. His mom was cool, I knew that, but me and sit down dinners didn't get along and I didn't want to offend her or embarrass myself if I ended up puking or something.

"What are we even seeing?" I asked Carson as we continued waiting for the others.

"Some thriller I think," he replied. "Dana picked it."

I sighed. "Of course she did."

Despite being scared of these types of movies, Dana seemed to love them. I on the other hand, was not particularly fond of them and would undoubtedly be anxious the entire night.

Carson lightly bumped his hip into mine. "I'll protect you."

His striking smile seemed to automatically put one on my face. All I wanted was to lean up and kiss him.

"Hey! Lovebirds!" Archie called out, holding a bag of popcorn in each hand. "Let's go before we can't find any seats. You have an entire movie to make out."

I scoffed at Archie, crossing my arms over my chest and walking ahead of the group. It seemed he was always going to find a way to get on my nerves, but that was just something I would have to put up with to be with Carson. That was nothing compared to what he had to put up with to be with me.

Carson easily caught up to me and put his arm around my shoulder once we were in the theater. We were lucky to find enough seats for all of us in the back row, and lucky for me, I sat on the end beside only Carson.

Logan sat on Carson's other side and passed down a bag of popcorn, Carson offering me some. I pulled the arm that wasn't holding the popcorn around my shoulder and rested my head on his. Carson laid his head on top of mine as the lights dimmed and the previews started.

When the movie eventually started, I turned my face closer to Carson's chest, only looking through the corner of my eyes to view the screen. I glanced over to see Dana was basically doing the same to Logan, though her eyes were wide and glued to the screen.

The opening scene ended with a jump-scare that sent both Dana and me into the laps of our boyfriends.

I spent the rest of the movie with my head turned into Carson's chest, his arm protectively secured around me. When we left the theater, I walked beside him with a straight face, trying to act like I didn't just hide in his chest like a child at a scary movie.

"I thought it was good," Archie said as we trekked through the parking lot.

"Arch, you fell asleep," Hadley pointed out.

He sent her a strange look. "No, I didn't."

"You were snoring in my ear!"

"How could you fall asleep during that?" Dana asked, turning around to face the others, her hand intertwined with Logan's. "It was terrifying!"

Isaac shook his head at them and sped up to walk beside Carson.

"Did he really fall asleep?" Carson asked him with a chuckle, sneaking his hand into mine.

"Oh yeah, he did," Isaac replied. "Twice. Once on my shoulder, once on Hadley's. I thought the people in front of us were going to kill him."

"Was he really snoring that loud?"

"It's hard to tell exactly how loud when it's directly in your ear."

I looked between Carson and Isaac and realized there was no awkward air around them. Though I was happy that Carson had been able to get over my history with Isaac, it still felt weird that he knew about it. Isaac and I largely ignored each other since we stopped hooking up, which was fine with me, but now not only was he my brother's friend, but my boyfriend's. It was going to be hard to keep ignoring him.

Carson and I rode with Logan and Dana back to the house while the others parted ways with us. Mom and Dad were sitting in the living room when the four of us walked in. Dad's gaze lingered on Carson and me while Mom's face lit up at the sight of us.

"How was the movie?" she asked in an excited tone. "Did you have a good time?"

She stood up and made her way to me, wrapping me in her arms and placing a kiss on my cheek. Though I was embarrassed at her show of affection, I couldn't bring myself to pull away from her. I always had a soft spot for my mother just as she had a soft spot for me. She was overly

excited at the idea of me going out with Logan's friends tonight. I thought she was actually going to cry when I told her I was going.

"It was scary!" Dana told her. "Arch fell asleep."

Mom playfully rolled her eyes as she let go of me. "That boy."

"Did you guys eat?" Dad asked, though I knew he was only asking because of me.

I rolled my eyes at him. "I ate before we left."

The last few days with my dad had been tense. It was like ever since he found out about me and Carson, something had changed and I couldn't quite place what it was. My mother on the other hand, was ecstatic about Carson and me. My father must have told her, and she practically wanted to throw a party.

"Good," Dad responded, turning his attention back to the television.

I turned and placed my hands on Carson's waist and brought my mouth to his ear.

"I'm going to go shower," I told him before releasing my hold on him and going up the stairs.

When I was done in the shower, I wrapped a towel around my waist and went to my bedroom to find Carson lying on his back with his hands propping up his head on my pillow.

He glanced over at me with a grin. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

I snorted and went over to my dresser to put on a pair of boxers and pajama bottoms, letting the towel fall to the floor.

"I didn't expect you to be in here," I told him, plopping myself down on my side on the bed, facing him.

"I'm no longer single, I'm not third wheeling with Logan and Dana anymore," he replied, shifting onto his side to face me.

"They probably wanted to have sex anyway," I said, causing Carson's face to change into a strange expression.

"With your parents here?"

"They have no shame."

Carson's hand found its way to my hip and pulled me closer to him. It traveled up my bare skin to the curve of my waist and I shivered at his touch.

"I should probably go soon," Carson mumbled against my skin as he brought his lips to my neck.

"No, you shouldn't." I let out a content sigh, placing my hand on the back of his head and letting my fingers tangle in his hair.

He pulled away slightly, his face still close to mine.

"I don't know how your dad feels about me staying here now that he knows about us," he told me in a strained voice.

"He won't care," I said, pulling his head to mine and brushing my lips over his as I spoke. "He lets Dana stay over all the time."

"Are you sure?"

I pulled away from him to get a better look at his face.

"I'm serious," I said. "He seemed cool about it when I told him. He didn't say much."

Carson pressed his lips together but didn't say anything.

"What?" I asked. "Did he say something to you?"

"No," he said, shaking his head.

Before I could say anything else, Carson placed his lips back on mine and there was nothing else I could think about at that moment.

***

When Carson came over to our house on Monday afternoon, I was hanging upside down in the tree in our front yard. He stood underneath me with his hands on his hips, his neck strained to look up at me.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I closed my eyes and let my arms dangle.

"Just hanging."

"Funny."

He didn't sound amused.

"If you're going to be up in the tree can you at least be right side up?" he asked, sounding slightly ticked off. "The last thing we need is for you to crack your head open because you fell out of a tree."

"I'm not going to fall out of the fucking tree."

I didn't mean to be short with him, but my day at school hadn't been great. To let off steam and think, sometimes I needed to be in a tree or lying on the ground. I didn't know why, I just did.

But my day was bad, all because Coach Bronson hated my guts. Like actually hated my guts. He had sent me away into a dark gym closet with Seth to grab the equipment for whatever stupid game we were playing.

Seth just ignored me the whole time, but being in a secluded area with him maxed out my anxiety for the day and put me in a sour mood.

"Do you want company up there?"

I opened my eyes and looked down at where Carson stood. He looked so cute with his concerned face, his nose slightly scrunched and his eyes squinting as he looked up at the sky.

"I could use it," I said and Carson began climbing up the trunk and branches.

"If I knew dating you would involve this much climbing, I would have prepared better," he joked as he sat on the branch I was currently hanging from.

"You'll get used to it eventually."

Carson hummed in agreement and looked as if he was thinking about grabbing onto my legs and hauling me upright.

"I think I want to start running with Luna on the bike trail," I blurted.

It was something I had been thinking about since I started running again. I wanted to start going more consistently to get into better shape, back like how I was before. I didn't know why I felt the need to tell Carson that. Maybe I just didn't want him thinking I was a complete loser.

"That's a good idea," Carson replied. "I'd offer to go with you but I'd just slow you both down."

I laughed and pulled myself up so that I was sitting beside him.

"You're assuming we'd wait up for you."

"What are you guys doing?" Logan called up to us, Dana standing next to him with an iced coffee in one hand and Logan's hand in the other.

"Why don't you ever sit in a tree with me?" she asked him, taking a sip of her coffee. "Guys, come hang out with us."

We spent the afternoon lounging in the living room until Dana and Carson left and I was alone with Logan, who I hadn't really spoken to much since he found out about Carson and me.

"So," Logan started once the two of us were alone, Luna sitting at our feet on the floor. "You and Carson seem to be doing well."

"Did you expect us to be doing bad?"

Logan rolled his eyes. "No, but I didn't realize how well the two of you work together. I didn't expect it I guess."

"How did you not notice the crush I've had on Carson for literal years?" I asked him with narrowed eyes.

He looked at me as if he thought I was kidding, then a look of surprise took over his features.

"Wait, seriously?" he asked.

"Yeah, I feel like it was kinda obvious," I muttered.

"It wasn't," Logan said, shaking his head and still looking surprised. "So you're, like, super serious about him."

I sent him a glare. "Yes, Logan. I'm serious about him."

Serious about making things work with him. Serious about not running away if things get tough. Serious about not ruining everything.

"I'm glad you guys are together then," Logan replied and it was my turn to be surprised.

I hadn't necessarily expected Logan to hate the idea of us, but I didn't expect him to like it either.

That was all that was said before the two of us went to our rooms for the night.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think about Vinny going out with Carson and his friends? And Carson not telling Vinny about what Jeff said. Do you think he should? And what about the end of the chapter with Logan?

31

Vinny Taylor

The cold breeze slapped my cheeks as I ran through the park with Luna at my side. She was loving every second of it, her mouth wide open with glee as the two of us neared the end of the path where we had started.

She just loved burning off her energy while I needed to blow off steam for a completely different reason. The week had gone by quickly and Friday had snuck up on me before I even realized it. Having dinner with Carson's mom shouldn't make me so nervous, but all I could think about was me messing something up and her thinking I wasn't good enough for her son. I already knew I wasn't, but I at least needed to fake it.

Once Luna and I reached the end of the path, I gave her some water from her bottle with the attached bowl which she gladly took. After she took a drink, the two of us walked home. As soon as we arrived at the house, Luna immediately went to her bed to lay down while my mother called out my name.

"In here, Vin!" she called from the kitchen.

I followed the sound of her voice to where she stood in the kitchen in front of an ironing board, ironing a dark blue button-down shirt.

"Hi, honey!" Mom greeted with a wide smile, looking up from the ironing board. "I was thinking you could wear this to your dinner with Carson and his mother tonight."

The shirt was obviously an old one of my father's. Probably too small for him but too large for me.

"Mom, I think that's a little too... formal," I told her with a strained smile. "It's just at their house, it's not like we're going out."

"Sweetheart, you're meeting your boyfriend's mom tonight," she said. "You need to look presentable!"

"I've already met her. Many times."

"This is different," she retorted. "You're meeting her as her son's boyfriend."

"Are you trying to make me more nervous?" I asked her, raising my eyebrows.

"No, no, of course not," she said, waving her hand. "I just want you going there looking like a respectable young man."

"That shirt isn't even going to fit me."

"Sure it will," she assured me. "Logan's worn it."

"I'm smaller than him."

"Vincent, honey," Mom sighed. "Wear the shirt. You'll look so handsome."

I let out a sigh of my own. "Sure, Mom. Whatever you say."

She sent me a content smile before turning back to the ironing board and continuing on the shirt. I turned on my heel and went upstairs to shower. When I was finished, I went to my room to see the shirt was hanging on my door. I sighed, snatching it off the hanger and put it on after drying off.

Once I was dressed, I looked at myself in the mirror and glared at my appearance. The shirt was too big and I looked ridiculous. It wasn't entirely noticeable, but the shoulders were too broad and it wasn't fit around my torso like it should have been. Maybe I would have fit in it a few months ago, but not now.

I didn't bother changing out of it before leaving my room and going downstairs to where my mother waited for me. She stood at the bottom of the stairs like she was in a teen romance movie waiting for her prom date to descend the stairs while my father sat on the couch in the living room.

"Oh you look so handsome, Vinny!" Mom squealed, clapping her hands together.

"Okay."

" *You do,* " she assured me, grabbing onto my arm and bringing me to the living room in front of my dad. "Doesn't he look great, Jeff?"

"Is that my shirt?" he asked as I stood in front of him with what I was sure was a miserable expression.

"Jeff! It's too small for you now anyway," Mom argued, placing her hands on her hips and glaring at her husband.

"Yes, Vinny, you look great," he told me. I just rolled my eyes at him. "You'll be home by nine, correct?"

" *Nine?* " I hissed. "When the fuck did my curfew change to *nine* ? Actually, when the fuck did I get a curfew?"

"I really hope you don't talk like that in front of Carson's mom," he replied.

"Since when have you given a shit about how I talk?"

"Vinny, you don't have to be home at nine, I don't know what he's thinking," Mom interjected, sending her husband a look.

"You've been weird ever since I told you about us," I accused him. "What's going on?"

Dad shook his head and scoffed. "No, I haven't, Vinny."

"What, are you okay with having a gay son, but not one with a boyfriend?"

Dad's eyes darkened. *"What?"*

"Absolutely not!" Mom exclaimed, looking shocked. "We're happy for you!"

"I know you are," I told her, my expression softening as I briefly glanced at her. "I'm talking about *him* ."

"That is not at all true," Dad said in an angry tone.

"Well, it seems like it," I told him, my tone matching his. "I'm leaving."

Neither of them tried to stop me as I turned out of the living room, out the door, and into my car. I sat there for a few moments to calm myself down. The last thing I needed was to show up at Carson's house being nervous and angry. That would be a recipe for disaster.

Eventually, I calmed myself down enough that I felt I was ready to make the drive to Carson's. I tried to think of anything other than my parents and how nervous I was and soon enough I was outside the house. I let out a deep breath before exiting the car and making my way to the front door.

I didn't even have to knock before the door opened and revealed Carson. He leaned in and kissed me before I could even say anything and all that anger from before melted away. At the end of it all, what mattered was how Carson and I felt about each other, not how my dad felt about us.

"I'm so happy to see you," I murmured against his lips.

He pulled away with a look of concern. "Is everything okay?"

I pecked his lips. "Now it is."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," I said, sneaking my arm around his waist. "Let's go see your mom."

"You look good," Carson said with a wide grin. "I like you all dressed up."

"Shut up."

Carson let out a laugh and threw his arm around my shoulder and led me to the kitchen after closing the door where his mother, Cass, stood at the stove.

"Vinny!" she exclaimed, placing the spoon she was holding down on the counter before scurrying over to me and wrapping me up in a hug. "I'm so glad you're here!"

I let out a quiet laugh and hugged her back. "Thanks for having me over, Cass."

She pulled away, keeping her hands on my shoulders. "We will have you over any time! I mean it."

Her kind eyes instantly put me at ease. Carson and his mother were very similar in that way. Both of them had a way of making me feel welcome and wanted.

"You boys go sit," she said. "I'll have dinner out in a few minutes."

"She really is so excited you're here," Carson told me in a whisper as he led me to the dining room. "She's been so happy since she got home from work."

"Let's hope I don't make her regret this then," I said, earning an annoyed glance from my boyfriend.

"You won't," he replied, eyes narrowed at me.

Almost as soon as the two of us sat down, Cass came rushing into the dining room with a dish and placed it on the table in front of us before sitting down across from her son.

"So, Vinny," Cass started as she served herself. "How are things? How's your family?"

"Good," I replied as Carson filled my plate. "There's not much going on with us honestly."

She nodded. "So, how did this happen?" She gestured to the two of us. "Only if you want to tell me of course, but I'm curious about how you guys got together."

"I made a fool of myself one night and kissed him and he rejected me," Carson told her, causing his mother to throw her head back in laughter.

"I didn't *reject* you," I interjected. "I was just... nervous?"

Cass let out another giggle as Carson shot me a look of disbelief.

"You did reject me," he said with a pointed look. "More than once."

"You guys are so cute," Cass added with a content sigh and I couldn't help but smile at her.

This dinner was going better than I imagined it would. My nerves had disappeared and it was nice being able to have a good, low-key night with Carson and his mom. That was until there was a knock on the door.

Cass jumped from her seat. "Oh, they're here!"

Carson's eyes widened. "Who? Who did you invite?"

Cass was already out of the dining room and headed toward the door. "Paul said to start without them because they were going to be late. I didn't expect them this soon!"

Carson looked to me with an expression that looked partly guilty and partly nervous.

"Is Paul your mom's boyfriend?" I asked him, placing my hand on his upper arm. "Do you not like him or something?"

"Vinny, there's something I need to tell you that I should've told you before, but I didn't expect something like this to happen." His voice was low and rushed, making it sound like something horrible was about to happen.

"Carson, what the fuck?" I asked him, crossing my arms over my chest. "What's the matter?"

He didn't have time to answer me before Cass re-entered the dining room with Paul following behind her and I instantly figured out what had gotten

Carson so worked up.

I recognized Paul as soon as I saw him. One would hope I would since I had been going over his house since I was a kid. Spencer stood behind him, his eyes wide as he nervously fiddled with his hands in front of him like he always did when he was uncomfortable.

"Vinny!" Paul exclaimed and I grimaced, though he didn't seem to notice. "It's so good to see you!"

"You too, Paul," I said with a strained smile.

"Oh! I forgot you and Spencer were friends," Cass said, sitting back down at the table.

"Yeah, we go way back," I muttered, shooting a glare over at Carson who was looking at me with a guilty expression.

It was like I could feel myself shrinking. Any walls I had let fall while I was here with Cass and Carson were put back up and there was nowhere I could hide. I kept my eyes down on my half-finished plate while I could feel the stares of Carson and Spencer burning my skin. Carson placed his hand on my leg under the table, but I shoved it off.

I didn't want his comfort. I wanted to evaporate into thin air or go back in time so I could say no to coming to this stupid dinner.

Luckily, the others at the table kept the conversation going among each other and Carson directed the conversation away from me. It was the least he could do.

When everyone was finished with their meals, I couldn't get out of my seat fast enough.

"Dinner was great, Cass, thank you so much for having me," I said to Carson's mom with a tight smile, offering her a hug.

She wrapped her arms around me. "You have to leave so soon."

"Yeah, my parents want me home."

She nodded in understanding and released me. I briefly waved to Paul and started toward the door with Carson following closely behind me. I refused to turn to face him, but he grabbed my arm and spun me around before I could open my car door.

"Don't fucking touch me right now, Carson," I snarled, ripping my arm free from his grasp. "What the fuck was that?"

"I'm so sorry, Vinny," Carson said with wide, glistening eyes. I was so mad at that moment those eyes couldn't even calm me down. "I should have told you but I never knew when would be the right time and I didn't expect that to happen."

"You could've warned me!" I shouted.

"I'm sorry, I didn't expect—"

"I know you didn't fucking expect it!" I exclaimed.

I ran my hand through my hair before taking my cigarettes out of my pocket and lit one in my mouth. I breathed out a puff of smoke before continuing.

"You know I have issues with Spencer and you didn't think it would be bright idea to let me know your mom is with Paul? What the fuck, Carson."

"I didn't know my mom invited them," he said, reaching out to grab my hand put I pulled it away from him. "If I knew she did, I would have told you."

"Now your mom's gonna think I'm a huge asshole for rushing out of there so quick and being silent through dinner," I complained, pacing in front of my car as I took another drag from my cigarette. "Fuck!"

"No, she won't," Carson assured me, shaking his head. "She won't."

"It really hurts to see him," I admitted, closing my eyes and pinching the bridge of my nose. I couldn't look at Carson as I admitted this. "It really

fucking hurts and it's ten times worse because I wasn't prepared."

"Vinny, I'm so—"

"Sorry, I know," I cut him off, opening my eyes to shoot him a glare. "I'm going home."

"Vin, wait—"

I opened my door and got in the car before slamming it shut. I didn't want to hear his apologies at that moment. I just wanted to be alone.

When I got home, I hoped to sneak past my parents, but Dad saw me and he instantly knew I was upset.

"You're home early," he commented. "I wasn't actually serious about the curfew thing, you know. I was just being protective."

I tried to ignore him but I should have known he would never let me get away with that.

"Hey, what's going on?" he asked, grabbing onto my arm to stop me from going up the stairs. "Is everything okay?"

"I just want to be alone."

"Did something happen with Carson?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Vincent—"

"Can I just be upset without you feeling the need to fix me?" I snapped.

He let go of my arm with a solemn expression and nodded.

Once I was free from his grip I jogged up the stairs and locked myself in my room.

***

Carson Hughes

I should have known when I showed up at Vinny's house the next day, the first person I would see would be Jeff. He looked at me with a serious expression as I entered the house.

"Is Vinny here?" I asked in a soft tone.

"What happened?" Jeff crossed his arms over his chest and stood from where he sat on the couch.

"I really just want to see Vinny," I said.

I hadn't really spoken to Jeff since we had that talk and I wasn't planning on speaking to him much after that anyway. All I wanted was to make things right with Vinny. I never knew how much seeing Spencer would affect him, but I should have told him about it anyway.

Vinny had opened up to me so much since we first started dating and I possibly ruined that by not telling him this and allowing him to be blindsided and cornered at my house.

"He was really upset when he came home last night," Jeff told me. "What happened?"

"What happened was my fault, not his," I said. I didn't want him thinking that Vinny had done something that had made the both of us upset.

"Have you thought at all about what I said?" Jeff asked, looking as if he already knew the answer.

"No, I haven't," I snapped. "In fact, I try not to think about it at all."

"That's clear," he said. "Look, I obviously don't know what happened, but whether it was something big or small, Vinny is going to react like this."

"What are you talking about?" I groaned. I was sick of listening to Jeff and what he thought was his wisdom. He clearly knew nothing about me or his son.

"I'm saying it doesn't matter what you do, if it makes Vinny upset, he is going to have a big reaction," Jeff explained. "Which is why I asked you to reconsider because this is going to end up hurting you in the end."

"So I should break up with him because *I* did something that made him upset and he reacted by being upset?"

"No, Carson, you don't understand what I'm saying," Jeff replied in annoyance. "He is not stable. It doesn't matter what you do. He can react badly to anything and it will hurt you eventually."

I shook my head at him and turned around.

"I'll see Vinny later."

And I walked out the door.

**

****IMPORTANT PLEASE READ****

So as we continue into the later part of this book, there may be more triggering content than in the beginning. As most of you can tell, Vinny has some things he is working through and struggles with. In the chapters we are approaching, we are going to be getting more into Vinny and his struggles with his mental health and his experiences. Chapters with triggering content will have TRIGGER WARNING and what the triggering content is at the very beginning of the chapter. I WILL NOT BE GOING INTO GRAPHIC DETAIL ABOUT ANY TRIGGERING CONTENT. When we do get to a chapter with a trigger warning on it, I want you all to know that I will NOT write graphic scenes about traumatic experiences. I also want to let everyone know there will be no suicide attempts in this book. I know some people have been worried about this with Vinny, but that will not be happening.

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you think about the chapter! Did you expect Spencer to show up to the dinner? Do you think Vinny is justified in his anger? How do you think Carson will make it up to him?

32

Carson Hughes

My friends could tell I was moping as I sat with my face in my hands at the table we currently occupied at the diner Crystal, Archie's girlfriend, worked at. Archie kept glancing at me as he tried to tell a story about his dream and then stopped with a loud sigh.

"Carson, I can't concentrate with you looking that that," Archie said, pointing at my face. "You look like someone just told you you have twenty-four hours to live."

"Yeah, I wasn't going to bring it up but you look super sad right now," Hadley added, taking a sip of her water.

"I am," I muttered with a sigh, my eyes cast downward at the table.

"What happened?" Logan asked from beside me. Isaac sat on my other side while the other three sat across from us.

"Vinny's mad at me," I said. "And it's my fault."

If I had just told him about my mom and Paul this would have been avoided completely. But for some reason I never felt like I had to tell him. It didn't seem like a big deal to me, but I should've known anyway.

"What did you do?" Logan asked. Dana and Hadley leaned forward in their seats, sipping on their drinks, as if they were going to hang onto every word I said.

"You guys know he came over last night," I started, all their eyes on me. "And everything was fine until my mom's boyfriend showed up."

"What?"

"My mom's dating Spencer's dad," I admitted. "And Spencer was with him. Vinny was pissed because I never told him. I didn't expect them to be there last night."

"Oh, that's fucked up," Dana said, sharing a glance with Hadley.

Hadley nodded in agreement. "If Darren was somehow connected to someone I had bad blood with and didn't tell me and they randomly showed up one day, I'd be so pissed."

"It's not that bad," Archie argued, earning glares from the girls.

"I can't believe it but I kinda agree with Arch," Isaac added.

"Isaac!" Hadley gasped.

"I know but hear me out," he said. "It's not like you knew they'd be there. You thought you'd have a chance to tell him before it would become an issue."

"But he still should've said something," Dana cut in. "Knowing it could be a possibility they would unexpectedly run into each other at Carson's house."

Logan was surprisingly quiet, eating his food as he listened to the conversation happening. I began to zone them out too.

"Logan?" Dana called out, seeming like she was waiting for him to agree with her.

He cleared his throat. "I think it'll be okay. Vinny was just shocked, but he'll get over it. Just give him some space."

Space was not what I wanted to hear, but I knew that was probably exactly what Vinny needed. He was often solitary other than when he was with me. He needed his alone time, especially with something like this bothering him.

"Think of it this way," Archie began. "If Vinny dumps you, you and Isaac can... keep each other company." The shit-eating grin on his face said that

he wasn't completely serious, but also he wasn't *not* serious either.

"Seriously, Archie?" Isaac complained with a scowl.

"Yeah, Arch, if you're not going to say anything helpful, don't say anything at all," Hadley added. "Isaac needs his own man, or woman... or person."

"Hadley," Isaac groaned.

"You're the only single one, Isaac!"

"By choice."

Hadley shot him a look that said she didn't believe him one bit.

"If you're into the jock type, you should hang out with me and Darren and the team more," Hadley said. "Statistically speaking, at least one of them has to be not straight. And you're cute, I bet you could snag one."

"He was into Vinny, you really think he's into jocks?" Archie retorted.

"Vinny's a runner!" Hadley shot back. "And they just hooked up, that doesn't mean he was into him."

"Well, at least literally into him," Archie replied.

"Arch!" Logan, Isaac, and I all exclaimed. Logan with a look of disgust, Isaac and I with looks of anger.

"Oh, are we not allowed to talk about that?"

Hadley sighed, shaking her head. "Learn to read a room, Arch."

"I thought we were talking about Carson's love life, not mine," Isaac said in a slightly raised voice.

"Right, sorry, got distracted."

"I'm fine with not talking about my love life," I cut in, hoping the conversation would be directed elsewhere, but ultimately knowing it wouldn't.

"No, we need to figure out a way for you to make this up to Vinny so he won't dump you," Dana said, earning a dramatic nod of agreement from Hadley.

"He's not gonna dump you," Logan assured me with a soft look before narrowing his eyes at his girlfriend.

"Okay, maybe he won't," Dana relented. "But you should still try to make it up to him."

"Take him on a nice date," Hadley added. "Oh! You could cook him his favorite meal and have a romantic evening."

"I don't think that would make him any less pissed off at me," I told them.

The girls continued throwing suggestions out at me. Take him for a romantic walk on the beach. Buy him a sentimental gift. Archie's suggestions were more lewd like "surprise him in his bed naked."

"You don't have to listen to what the others say," Logan said as we started leaving the diner. "Just give him some space and talk to him once things have cooled down."

"I just– I had no idea he would react like that," I told him in a low voice.

Logan paused, a look of contemplation on his face. "Just talk to him."

That was really all we needed. To talk. We didn't need some grand gesture just to make the other forget why they were angry. We needed communication and understanding.

To: Vinvin

meet me at our tree tonight? i'll be there at midnight. i understand if you don't want to come yet.

My message was left unanswered, though I didn't expect a response. If Vinny was going to show up at the tree tonight, he would do it without telling me beforehand. I would just have to wait there for his arrival.

I showed up to the tree early, too anxious to wait any longer. I knew I would be waiting a while to see if Vinny actually came, but I didn't mind it. It would give me time to think about what I wanted to say. There was really nothing for me to say other than I was sorry and I should have told him sooner. I didn't want to give him excuses.

I was sitting up in the tree, staring at the stars when I heard a noise come from below. I nearly fell out of the tree as I looked down but I was relieved when I saw Vinny at the bottom, looking up at me before he started the climb. I moved over so he would be able to sit on the branch beside me.

Once he climbed to where I was, he sat beside me and the two of us looked at each other. His expression was soft and his cheeks flushed, like he was embarrassed. All of the anger I hated seeing on his face from the day before was gone.

"Thanks for coming," I said, clearing my throat after a few moments of silence. Vinny just nodded. "I wasn't sure you would and I wouldn't have blamed you if you didn't."

He looked up to the sky. "I probably wouldn't have if it wasn't here. I just feel... comfortable here."

"I know," I said. "Me too."

We sat in a comfortable silence again, Vinny looking at the sky and me looking at him. Then he turned to me, a small, barely there smile on his face.

"You're staring," he said.

I let out a breathy laugh but my expression quickly went back to a serious one.

"Look," I started. "I know I've already said this, but I am so sorry about what happened last night. My mom is too. I didn't tell her the details, I just told her it made us both uncomfortable."

"I don't want your mom to feel bad," he said with a groan. "She didn't know."

"I should have told you about Paul and Spencer," I told him. "I guess in my head it didn't feel like that big of a deal and I wasn't exactly *keeping* it from you, I just never thought to bring it up."

Vinny looked down at his dangling legs as he listened to me.

"I wish you told me," he muttered, still looking down. "But I think I was more mad about how shocked I was. I was really nervous about dinner with your mom and I finally got comfortable and that happened."

The soft sound of his voice was breaking my heart.

"I should probably tell you why things aren't good with Spencer," Vinny continued, finally looking up at me. He looked tired like he hadn't slept at all the night before.

"You don't have to," I quickly replied. "Not if you don't want to."

"I just think it would be better for both of us if you knew *why* I was so upset," he said. "But don't freak out about it."

"Why would I freak out about it?"

"Spencer and I had sex." He said it with such a straight face like we were talking about something as simple as the weather.

"You... what?" I had to bite my tongue from saying anything else and had to take my mind away from the fact that my boyfriend had sex with one of my best friends and my potential step-brother.

"It was Spencer who Logan caught me with over the summer," Vinny admitted. "That's not why things are weird with us, at least not fully."

"So, Logan knows?"

"Yeah, he does."

That explained why Logan seemed to keep Spencer in the loop with what was going on with Vinny. Like when he invited him to the family cookout or when he texted him when Vinny was in the hospital.

"Should you be telling me this?" I asked. "Is he—"

"Spencer's out," Vinny answered. "He's out to his family and publicly, before I even was. He's just not loud about it I guess."

I nodded, relieved.

"I saw Marina over at Spencer's one night," I said. "She said you guys had some sort of falling out."

Vinny nodded and let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah, we did."

"And it was because you had sex with Spencer?"

"Spencer really liked me, like he wanted to be with me," Vinny started. "And I didn't like him like that so I tried not to, I don't know, get his hopes up I guess."

He paused for a moment and I urged him to continue.

"I knew he liked me for a while but we just kinda ignored it and it worked for a while," he continued. "And around the the summer time was when I really started hooking up with people and so did Spencer so I thought he had gotten over me."

The wind blew, causing Vinny to shiver. I moved closer to him so that we were touching.

"But he wasn't and he told me that eventually," Vinny said. "We talked about it and I told him I just didn't feel that way but I wouldn't be opposed

to... hooking up. Which was stupid but I was basically obsessed with sex at that point so I wasn't thinking about how bad of an idea that was."

He let out a shaky breath.

"And so we decided to hook up and it was going great until Logan walked in and then it was awkward as fuck," Vinny continued. "I told Spencer to get out and then I flipped out at Logan and came out to my family that night."

I stared at him while he looked down at his lap as if he was trying to find the courage to continue. I reached out to grab his hand and he took it, lightly squeezing it.

"I didn't talk to Spencer for the next couple days and then something... happened," he said, his voice getting lower. "Something I'm not ready to talk about, but it left me really distraught."

My heart ached at that and I rubbed my thumb over the back of his hand to comfort him, and to comfort myself.

"I probably didn't move for hours, I don't even know," he said, squeezing my hand again. "It was really late when I decided to go see Spencer. I just — I needed him, and Marina, so I walked there, I was really out of it so it was just a fog until I got to his house and knocked on the door."

He took a deep breath before continuing.

"He was pissed to see me there," Vinny said with a sad chuckle. "I had ghosted him for days and I just showed up to his house but I didn't know what to do. I tried to tell him what happened but he wouldn't listen, he just got more angry at me, screaming at me and telling me that I don't care about him and I just used him for sex and how I was a liar and got with someone I specifically told him I wouldn't get with."

Vinny's eyes remained cast downward but I saw the strained look on his face and the tension in his jaw.

"He wouldn't let me explain," Vinny choked out, his voice becoming strained. "And Marina was there agreeing with him and I was crying because of what happened and because my friends wouldn't help me. They wouldn't listen long enough to figure out what was wrong."

His voice faded like he was holding back from crying.

"And then they went back inside and left me out there," Vinny said, his voice empty and void of emotion. "I sat out there crying all night. Paul found me in the morning and drove me home. I felt so pathetic. I never felt more alone."

"And they never tried to make things right with you?" I asked, pulling him closer to me.

"They did," he replied. "Tried to but it was too late. I had already decided I was alone and certain things made it so I really couldn't make things right with them even if I wanted to."

"What do you mean? What things?"

Vinny slowly looked up at me, his eyes glossy with so much emotion.

"I—" he hesitated. "I'm not ready to talk about everything. I really wasn't ready to say all that but I did."

"Thank you," I said. "For telling me."

"That's why it hurts so much to see him, or Marina," he said, glancing down at our hands. "Because I'm just reminded of that every time. About it felt like they hated me, how I stayed there and neither of them came back."

His face reddened like he was holding back tears, so I threw my arm around him and pulled him close, kissing his head. We stayed like that for a while. It felt like there were still so many pieces to the puzzle that I was missing, but that didn't matter at that moment.

What mattered was Vinny and letting him know that he wasn't alone.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think about Carson and his friends at the beginning? What about what Vinny admitted about what went on with him and Spencer? Did you expect that? Let me know!

33

Vinny Taylor

Running through the park with Luna had become a regular thing. As soon as I got home from school Luna was running circles around me and waiting for me to take her out to the park. I was glad for her enthusiasm because without her, I wasn't sure so would have kept it up.

The park was getting less and less busy as the weather turned colder. The weather didn't bother us though, and I was glad that others stopped coming.

The problem with running is that it didn't really clear my head. It made me think more. And I hadn't stopped thinking about what I admitted to Carson over the weekend. About what happened with Spencer and Marina and how I felt responsible for it and how there was no way to make it right.

Luna slowed on the path and I brought her over to the side in the grass to give her a drink of water.

"Vinny?" a voice called out and it wasn't a voice I was excited to hear.

I slowly turned my glance to the side to see Marina standing a little ways away from me. Spencer was behind her a little further away, but he was taking pictures and not paying attention to the two of us.

My throat closed as the two of us stared at each other. It was painful to see them both, but there was nothing I could do. Nothing was right and nothing would make it right.

"I've been meaning to talk to you at school," she said, awkwardly looking down at the ground. "But I haven't had the guts to do it. You look good."

I looked down at myself then back at her, still not saying anything.

"Do you wanna maybe come hang out?" she asked, pointing her thumb back at Spencer. "We could talk a little?"

I looked over at Spencer, whose back was facing us as he messed with his camera, and then back at Marina. Her expression was pleading, like she was two seconds away from getting down on her knees and begging me to talk to her. Spencer must not have told her about what happened at Carson's. She would have brought it up because that was how she was.

"I have to go," I told her in a rushed tone.

"Vinny, please," she pleaded with wide, glistening eyes. "We miss you so much."

I didn't say anything as I shook my head and turned away with Luna. The two of us ran back through the park and out, not bothering to finish our usual route. I couldn't run the risk of running into them again.

"You're back early from your run," Logan commented as I walked into the house a few minutes later. Dana sat with him on the couch under his arm.

I must have had a look on my face of either anger or sadness, I couldn't tell which, because when Logan glanced at me, his expression changed.

"Are you okay?" he asked, sitting up straighter on the couch.

"Just wasn't feeling it today," I said, letting Luna off her leash. She ran straight to her water bowl and started drinking.

"You or the dog?" Dana joked.

"Me," I said with a tight smile. "She's always ready for a run."

"So," Logan said, stopping me in my tracks as I started toward the stairs.

"Hm?"

"Are you and Carson okay?" he asked. Dana looked insanely interested in the direction the conversation was going.

"Yeah, why?"

"You were both pretty upset the other day," Logan replied. "I just wanted to make sure you guys were good."

"I know he told you what happened," I said, though I didn't actually know that until that moment. I could just tell by the look on Logan's face.

"Okay, so he told me."

"And if you're wondering if I told him about *you know what* , I did," I said, causing a look of confusion on Dana's face, but Logan knew exactly what I was talking about, just the part about Spencer and me.

His eyes widened. "You *did* ?"

"Do you guys want me to go so you don't have to speak in code?" Dana asked, looking between the two of us.

"No, I'm going upstairs," I said and quickly left for my room before Logan could say anything else to me.

Once I made it to my room, I shut the door and threw myself down on my bed, consumed by the thought of what had just taken place at the park.

My emotions were spent and at that moment I just felt void of anything. Like I was just taking up space with no mind or soul. I tried to pull myself out of this state, but I couldn't. I was desperate to feel something, anything, but there was nothing. I was just there.

***

"Hey, where are you going?" Carson asked as I walked by the next day at school.

He stood at his locker while I was making my way to the English room like I usually did in the morning. I had never passed by while Carson stood at his locker, but this morning, that was where he stood.

"English," I muttered, looking around the hallway. It was mainly deserted, but that didn't cause me any comfort.

"Class doesn't start for another half an hour," Carson said with a laugh, leaning against the lockers.

"I know, I just sit in there in the mornings, I—" I paused. "I'm trying not to smoke as much so I don't want to be outside."

Carson looked surprised. "You are?"

I nodded. "It messes with my breathing, makes me cough. Kinda need to breathe to run. And live I guess."

Carson's smile reached his eyes. "That's really awesome that you're trying to quit."

"Trying being the key word," I said as Carson reached out and grabbed my hand in his.

"You'll do your best," he said. "And if it doesn't work out, you'll try again."

I didn't think about the fact that Carson and I were holding hands in school, where anyone could see us. Or if Carson realized he was doing it. The look on his face told me he was as he smiled contently down at our intertwined hands. I couldn't help but smile back.

That was until I made eye contact with Seth, who stood at the end of the hall with his hand in a fist and his jaw clenched.

"Vinny?" Carson's voice pulled my attention away from Seth.

"Hm?" I asked, looking over at him.

"I asked if you wanted me to go sit in the classroom with you," he said. "You just kinda zoned out for a second there."

"Yeah, uh, sorry, yeah if you want," I stammered, looking back down the hall to see that Seth was gone.

Carson continued holding my hand and started leading me down the hall to our English classroom. I tried to take my mind off of Seth and what he saw, but his face would flash in my mind every so often. Not even Carson's signature smile could distract me for long.

My mind was a fog as I sat with Carson in the classroom and it stayed that way all throughout class. Once class ended, we headed toward the gym locker room, the place I was dreading going to for the last hour.

I stood beside Carson as the two of us changed into our gym clothes. He started talking to Logan, who was on his other side, while I sat down on the bench behind us. I could feel Seth's presence in the room but I didn't look for him.

Of course on a day I had pissed Seth off, Coach Bronson had us playing a stupid game instead of running the track. He said it was too cold out, but I would rather freeze than have to play a team sport, let alone have to interact with Seth who was already glaring at me as soon as I walked out to the gym floor.

"Vinny," Logan called out.

I hadn't even noticed Coach Bronson picked captains already. Logan looked at me expectantly, motioning me over to his side. I scurried over to my brother, keeping my eyes low as I noticed Seth had already been picked for the other team.

Of course, for Logan's next pick, he picked Carson who came to stand by me. I couldn't even look at him as I put some distance between us, fearing he would notice and show me that look of disappointment.

I didn't pay attention as the rest of the team was picked and I didn't know what we were playing until Coach Bronson picked up a basketball and pointed at me then at center court. I dragged my feet over there, knowing he wouldn't let me get away with ignoring him.

A girl from the other team stood across from me and Coach Bronson tossed the ball up, it easily going to the girl as she jumped up to retrieve it and I

kept my feet planted.

"Are you even going to try?" Coach Bronson asked me as the game started, people on each team running to wherever the ball was.

"I did," I said, earning a glare from him.

"Put in some actual effort or I'll fail you."

I rolled my eyes and jogged over to where everyone else was. One of the girls on the other team took a shot at the basket, but it was knocked down by one of our players and bounced over to me.

Seth and another guy on his team immediately made their way toward me, causing me to quickly pass the ball off to Logan without even looking at him. He groaned after it hit him in the stomach, clearly not ready for my pass.

"What the hell, Vin," Logan groaned as the ball bounced away from him.

Seth picked the ball up and easily shot the ball through the hoop, Carson grabbing the rebound and heading toward the other side of the court.

The rest of the game was quite uneventful. I tried to stay out of it as much as possible and Seth kept his distance from me which I could only hope was a sign of him not being angry about seeing me with Carson this morning, though that was just wishful thinking.

I should have known when I ended up being the last person in the locker room after class it would be trouble. Carson had mentioned needing to get to his next class early to talk to his teacher, so he wasn't able to wait for me. I thought I was alone until I heard his voice.

"What the hell is going on with you and Carson?" Seth asked, stepping out of the showers. He had changed back into his regular clothes, his hair damp with a towel hanging off one shoulder.

I ignored him, picking up my backpack and turning to leave the locker room.

Seth stepped in front of me, halting my movement. "You thought I wouldn't notice? What have you told him?"

"I haven't told him shit," I spat, backing away from him.

"It's only a matter of time," Seth said, stepping closer to me. "That's what happens when you get close to people. You let yourself get vulnerable. You start to *tell* them things."

That was the way Seth's deranged mind worked; If I had friends, or a boyfriend, they would eventually find out the secret he was determined to keep hidden. If those people cared about me, they wouldn't let it stay a secret. That was what Seth said anyway. And I didn't want to know what he would do to me if he decided that I was lying to him.

"You would know if I told someone," I said.

"Would I?" he asked, shaking his head. "Because I don't think I would until it was too late. I already told you I'm not going to let this shit ruin my plans."

I didn't say anything as he moved closer.

"I'm going to go play college football, me and Darren together," he said in a low tone. "And if you open your mouth, you'll ruin everything."

"I don't give a shit about what you do," I snapped, my hands turning to fists at my sides. "I just want to move on."

Seth smirked. "Getting brave."

He leaned closer to me, pushing me up against the lockers. My breathing became rapid as he held me by the front of my shirt. I was cornered. My throat felt like it was closing and my body stilled, unable to push him off. It was like the real me was locked away and what was left was a shell, vulnerable to Seth's actions.

"But I don't believe you," he hissed, giving me a hard shove, my back hitting the lockers with force. "I think I'm going to need to give you a

preview of what's going to happen to you, and to Carson, if I find out you squealed."

I started to panic, moving to get out of his grip, but I wasn't strong enough. Seth shoved me back again, causing my head to hit the lockers this time. I blinked rapidly for a moment as the force from hitting my head caused dizziness.

His fist made contact with my stomach, causing me to double over. He threw me down on the floor, about to hit me again before somebody walked in.

"What the fuck!" Logan exclaimed, rushing over and pushing Seth away from me.

He stood in front of where I was on the floor, standing between Seth and me.

"Leave him alone, Seth," Logan spat. "Just get out of here."

Seth let out a laugh, shaking his head and making eye contact with me once more before exiting the locker room. Logan didn't turn to face me until Seth was gone, then he reached out to help me up from the floor.

"What the hell was that about?" Logan asked as soon as I was up on my feet.

I let out a shaky breath. "Just leave it alone, Logan."

He scoffed. "Like hell."

Logan grabbed something from one of the lockers, presumably whatever he left in there that caused him to come back, and then followed me closely out of the locker room.

"Seth literally had you cornered in the locker room and was about to beat the shit out of you," Logan said. "And not going to lie, if he decided he didn't care about me stepping in, he probably could've taken both of us. I'm not just going to forget about that."

"You know he bothers me."

"Well, Darren said he talked to him."

I stopped and turned to face him. " *What* ?"

Logan let out a sigh with a look of regret on his face.

"I may have asked Darren to get Seth to stop messing with you," he admitted.

"You need to stay *the fuck* out of my business, Logan," I snapped. "I can handle myself."

I was already feeling on edge because of what happened with Seth in the locker room, and now I had to deal with the fact that Logan was sticking his nose where it didn't belong. I felt sick from all this shit. From being threatened by Seth, and him threatening Carson. My head and stomach hurt from being hit and shoved.

"I just don't want him hurting you," Logan said. "I'm guessing you won't let me go tell the principal what he did to you?"

I scoffed, turning on my heel and walking away from my brother.

Seth wanted me isolated and alone, and I had been that way for so long, but I was sick of it.

I wanted to crawl away and hide to where he could never find me again, somewhere I could be happy and be with Carson and have friends where I didn't have to look over my shoulder for Seth's glares.

I was too scared of what he might do to me, and now, to Carson.

Those thoughts pushed me into the dark.

**

Thanks for reading!!

What did you think about Vinny running into Marina and Spencer? What about what happened with Seth?

Let me know!

34

Vinny Taylor

There was a knock on my door as I sat at my window, blowing out smoke from my cigarette. I ignored it for a moment until there was another knock and Carson's voice coming through the door.

"Vinny?" he called. "You in there?"

My mind had been in a dark place since my encounter with Seth earlier in the day. It felt like my walls were closing in, close to suffocating me. In addition to that, the anger I felt at myself for allowing to Seth to have this type of effect on me was consuming my thoughts. I was angry and scared and sad and numb.

But then I heard Carson and the deep, sweet sound of his voice calling out to me as if trying to pull me back into the light. His voice sweet like sugar and honey, reminding me of what good I had in my life. And also reminding me not to mess this up by closing myself off from him once again.

I stood up from the window sill, resting my cigarette in the ash tray, before walking over to the bedroom door, unlocking it, and opening it to reveal Carson and his easy smile.

"Why'd you have the door locked?" he laughed, placing his hand on my hip and kissing the side of my face.

"I must've just done it without realizing," I lied, closing the door behind him after he walked in.

I went back to the window and stubbed out the cigarette, shoving the ash tray under my bed as I tried to avoid Carson's gaze.

"I thought you were quitting?" he asked, lying back on my bed.

I let out a frustrated sigh. "I am, it's just— it's hard."

Carson shot me a sympathetic look. This look was almost as bad as the one of disappointment. I bit down on my bottom lip and looked up at the ceiling.

I wished that seeing him would instantly make me feel better, but the fear and anger and numbness still lingered. And now I had to try to act like nothing was wrong so to not make him worry about me or think he had done something wrong.

"Hey," Carson said, moving across the bed and grabbing my hand into his. I looked down at him. "It's okay. I didn't mean to make you feel bad about it."

"You didn't," I muttered.

I felt myself starting to get lost in his eyes in the way that he looked at me like I was all he saw. His gaze pierced me and it was like I could feel it on my skin.

My hand tightened around his as I let Carson pull me down onto the bed beside him. I was suddenly conscious of the fact that I smelled and tasted like smoke as he pulled me closer and started kissing my neck, but he didn't seem to mind.

Carson's kiss made me shiver as his lips moved up my neck and to my jaw, sucking on the sensitive skin where the two met. My mouth opened and I let out a noise of pleasure that caused Carson to smile against my skin. My hand found its way into his hair while Carson's hand moved from my stomach, lower and lower.

"Is this okay?" he asked against my jaw, his hand low on my stomach, just above my most sensitive area.

I hadn't wanted anyone to touch me there for a long time, but as I lay down in front of Carson, his hand just inches from going down into the front of my jeans, I wanted it. I wanted *him* .

I nodded and Carson laughed against me.

"If it's okay, you have to tell me," he said.

"Fuck..." I groaned. "It's more than okay. Just touch me. Please."

Carson's hand moved lower and he fumbled with the button on my jeans before he finally got it undone and let his hand under the waist band of my boxers. I gasped at the feeling of his hand on me, the feeling of his skin touching me where I hadn't been touched in so long.

He moved his hand over me and I was suddenly worried that nothing would happen. I didn't want him to feel like I wasn't attracted to him or wasn't enjoying what he was doing. It was scary thinking that he could touch me so intimately, and that I could want it so badly, but my body wouldn't react the way either of us wanted it to. He continued for a few more moments before I finally let out a frustrated groan.

"Forget it," I grumbled, pulling his hand out of my pants. "This isn't going to fucking work."

I was frustrated. And angry. And embarrassed. I couldn't even bring myself to look at Carson, but he grabbed my face in his hands and kissed me.

"It's okay, Vin," he said against my lips. "If now's not the time, then it's not the time."

"Then when will it be the fucking time?" I asked, pulling my head away from him, his hands still on my face. "My dick hasn't been working for months now."

Carson smirked, and I swore I had never seen him look so mischievous.

"Well, I guess there is something I could try," he said, pulling his hands away from me and turning me so that I was on my back.

Carson moved down between my legs, looking at me for permission to do whatever it is he was talking about. Although not knowing what he was

doing made me incredibly uneasy, I wanted to trust Carson and *show* him that I trusted him. So I told him to go ahead.

"Maybe this will work," he said with a grin as he pulled down my pants and boxers before beginning to kiss up my thighs.

When he put his mouth on me, it was heaven.

And it did work. It worked really well.

***

I thought nothing would be able to dampen my mood after getting blown by my boyfriend (and it actually working), but that was until the two of us went downstairs only to be greeted by my grandmother. Well, not so much greeted as scrutinized and questioned.

"Is this your boyfriend?" she asked me in a nasally tone, pointing at Carson. "Jeff said you got a boyfriend."

"Yes, Grandma," I mumbled, gesturing toward Carson who had a tight, awkward smile on his face.

"I thought this was Logan's friend," she said, her eyes slightly narrowing.

I sighed. "He is."

"Your dating his friend?"

"I'm Carson," Carson spoke up, trying to alleviate the tension my Grandmother brought wherever she went. "We've met before."

"I know," Grandma said. "I'm not *that* old."

I scoffed at her but didn't say anything. This was the same woman who couldn't remember Dana to save her life even though she had met her hundreds of times.

"Oh, hi Grandma," Logan weakly said as he and Dana walked into the room, trying to sound enthusiastic and failing miserably.

"Is this your girlfriend?" Grandma asked him. "You're both dating?"

"You've met Dana," Logan replied through gritted teeth.

"I didn't know she was your girlfriend."

Dana and I shared a glance and I motioned for her to follow Carson and I into the kitchen, leaving Logan to deal with our deranged grandmother.

"I swear that woman just wants Logan to dump me," Dana said as soon as we were away from them. "Am I not pretty enough for her grandson? I think we look good together!"

"You do," Carson assured her.

"She's just psychotic," I told her with a shrug. "Trust me, it's better if she doesn't remember you."

"You guys left me with her!" Logan hissed as he rushed into the kitchen.

"How did you get away?" Dana asked him.

"My dad came in."

Just as Logan said that, Dad walked into the kitchen with a grimace on his face and his mother following closely behind him, talking his ear off.

"Grandma's staying for dinner, isn't that great?" he sarcastically asked, earning a smack in the shoulder from his mother.

"Don't think you can fool me, Jeffrey," she scolded, wagging a finger at him. "But I think it's important that I stop by and see my son and grandkids every once in a while."

Dad glanced at me briefly before looking back at Grandma.

"As long as that's all you're doing," he said. "And not trying to do anything else."

She scoffed. "Like what?"

"You know what."

I knew where he was going with this. Grandma never just stopped by, that wasn't in her nature. She was only here because she wanted something. And by the way he looked at me, I could tell exactly what it was.

"Okay, so I want to talk to you guys about going to the twins birthday party this weekend," she said.

The twins being my biological half brother and sister that I had never even met.

"We're not talking about that," Dad denied, shaking his head and shooting me a concerned look.

"You're going to keep him from his brother and sister's birthday?" Grandma questioned him in an exaggerated tone.

"It's Vinny's choice if he wants to go," Dad replied. "But we aren't talking about it right now."

I wanted to sink away into nothing. I hated being talked about like I wasn't in the room.

Grandma always seemed to do that. She thought Dad controlled me and kept me as far away from Robbie as possible, and it was like that for a little while. But once I got old enough to understand the situation, it had always been my choice whether I saw him or not.

She didn't like to hear that though. Grandma would rather believe that it was all Dad's doing rather than my own choice. It wasn't like she cared about me much anyway. She cared for Robbie because he was the favorite and she felt bad for all he had gone through while he was getting drunk and addicted to drugs. She didn't care about how that had affected me, only how

it affected him. That was why she rarely ever talked to me, only about me. She wanted to keep the fictional version of me intact in her head to go along better with the narrative she had conjured up.

Who cared if I never had any desire to talk to my biological father? Grandma only cared for her own wishes and in what ever idealized world she had made up, it was one where I went to live with Robbie because according to her, I didn't belong in this family. It was bullshit, but if I listened to her long enough. I'd start to believe it.

"I'm not going to some stupid fucking party," I said with a huff, causing my grandmother to glare at me.

"Watch your filthy mouth, Vincent," she snarled. "You get that from your Uncle."

I rolled my eyes. "You know, you calling him my uncle doesn't make me see him as my father any less."

She narrowed her eyes at me, but didn't say anything.

"She doesn't get that," Dad said. "And it doesn't seem like she ever will."

Grandma didn't say anything but she scowled at her son like she was trying to make him vanish from where he stood.

"You kids go do something while I make dinner," he said to us, and that was all we needed to hear to rush out of the kitchen and into the basement.

"I can't stand that woman," I groaned, throwing myself down on the couch. Carson immediately took the spot by my side and threw his arm around me.

"I'm surprised Dad didn't say anything about your hickeys," Logan said with his eyebrows raised, him and and Dana sitting on the loveseat across from us.

"Shut the fuck up," I snapped. "He's too used to seeing them on you."

Dana shrugged. "I like leaving a good hickey."

Carson's face reddened as he examined my neck and jaw, moving my face with his hand to get a better look.

"I didn't mean to," he sheepishly said.

I turned my face and kissed his red cheek.

"Don't let Logan make you feel bad," I told him. "I thought we agreed he's an idiot?"

"What?" Logan snapped as Carson let out a loud laugh.

I ignored him as I curled further into Carson's side, loving the feeling of his body over mine. After what we had done earlier, I was on cloud nine. With him here, I could forget about Seth and his threats that shook me to my core and my grandmother's guilt trips that left me questioning my decisions.

But once I was alone, that all came back.

Carson and Dana left after dinner and I went up to my room. I wanted to tie myself to the bed to keep myself from getting up to go to the window for a smoke.

I couldn't keep my mind from Seth's threats and the way they made me feel unsafe in my own home, how I knew he would find a way to hurt me if he really wanted to. The implications that had for Carson and me made me feel even worse.

It made me feel like I needed to be isolated to be safe, but was the isolation worth the agony of having no one? It didn't feel fair to have to choose between my happiness and safety. I didn't want to choose. I want my life to be free of the pain and sadness and feeling like I'm constantly falling with no end in sight.

But that didn't feel possible.

So I sighed, heaved myself off the bed, went to the window, and lit a cigarette.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

35

TRIGGER WARNING: self harm

Carson Hughes

I had been dragged to yet another football game on a Friday night, despite preferring staying in with Vinny. Hadley had said we *had* to come because it was "Halloweekend," as she called it. And she wanted us all to dress up for Darren's Halloween party later that night. I would rather be undressed in Vinny's bed, and I had told her that.

"He can come!" Hadley had said. "To the party I mean."

Logan scoffed. "He won't come. Especially not if Seth's going to be there. I still have to talk to your little boyfriend about that by the way."

Hadley glared at him. "Darren doesn't control Seth's actions and he's not even that close with him anymore anyway."

"Oh, he's not?" Logan sarcastically replied. "So he won't be at his party?"

Hadley crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't know, Logan! He probably will be."

The two had continued bickering for the next few minutes. That had been back at Logan's house before we headed back to school for the game. Vinny had left the house to take Luna on a run just after we arrived there, and he hadn't been back by the time we left for the game. That left me missing him and not at all eager to spend all night without him.

Logan and Isaac sat on either side of me on the icy bleachers that night, a crowd of our peers surrounding us. The three of us probably had matching looks of boredom as we stared down at the field. It really wasn't enjoyable watching Seth play amazingly well and being witness to the adoring cheers

for him from the entirety of the student body and the staff present in the crowd.

Just looking at Seth flared my temper. I was never a violent person, but he made me want to be.

After Logan had told me about what he walked in on with Vinny and Seth in the locker room, all rational thought left my head and I wanted to beat Seth senseless. I waited for Vinny to tell me about it, but he never did. I tried not to fault him for that.

As I continued glaring at him, Seth threw a perfect pass to Darren, who then ran it in for a touchdown. Seth ran down the field and pulled Darren to him in celebration.

"Wow, they really look like they're not close anymore," Logan said in a snarky tone to me, though I knew he wouldn't have minded if Hadley heard him. She and Dana were too busy standing up and cheering to even notice.

"I thought Darren said he talked to Seth," I said in a low tone, close to Logan's ear so he could hear me over the crowd.

"He did," Logan replied. "Seth just obviously didn't listen."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to tell Darren he needs to control his dog," Logan snarled. "Darren's a good guy, I don't know why he sticks around with him."

"When you're friends with someone long enough, you begin to be blind to their faults."

"Are you saying you're blind to my faults?"

"No," I laughed. "I see them clearly, but that's probably what it's like for them."

Logan lightly shoved me, a ghost of a smile forming on his face.

"Sorry, Mr. Perfect," he said.

The rest of the game was just as painful to sit through as the beginning and as we waited with Hadley for Darren after it was over, Logan made it known that he was unhappy. His attitude became even worse when Darren walked out of the locker room beside a laughing Seth. Logan couldn't hold back.

"Did you tell Darren what you did to Vinny the other day?" Logan asked before the two of them had time to even breathe.

"Logan," Hadley hissed. "What the hell are you even talking about?"

"Seth knows exactly what I'm talking about."

Archie looked amused at the exchange while Dana and Isaac were slowly moving behind the rest of us.

Seth just grinned and I wanted to punch the look off his face. It scared me that I wanted to do even worse to him.

"It's all a misunderstanding," Seth said, looking directly at Logan as Darren turned to face him.

"What did you do?" Darren asked with a look of confusion, adjusting the strap to his bag on his shoulder.

"Vinny and I just got in a little argument," he said. "And you know I have trouble holding back. It was nothing."

"Oh, fuck off," Logan replied. "You're so full of shit."

Seth looked at me with that stupid grin on his face and it took everything in me to keep my composure. He looked at me like he could see right through me.

"Seth won't bother Vinny ever again, right?" Darren said with a pointed look, his words phrased more like a command than a question.

"Never again," Seth said in a tone that didn't sound serious. "Best friend who I would do *anything* for. Wouldn't want to ruin your relationship with your girl over this."

Darren and Seth shared an intense look before Darren lightly shoved him away.

"I'll see you later," Darren said and Seth walked off, sparing me one last mischievous smile.

We stood in silence for a moment before Darren spoke up again.

"I'll talk to him more when it's just the two of us," Darren said, raking his fingers through his hair. "He'll be less cocky then. He likes to put on a show in front of people."

"You better make him behave," Hadley warned, standing next to her boyfriend. "Vinny doesn't deserve that shit."

"Seth just doesn't like people who don't bend to his will," Darren explained. "I'm not making excuses for him, that's just the way he is."

"Well, he can leave my brother out of his power trip," Logan replied.

"He will," Darren assured him with a nod. "I'll make sure he really listens to me this time."

"Good! Now we can get ready to party!" Hadley excitedly exclaimed, causing Dana to perk up and Archie to let out a sound of excitement.

"I'm not going to go," I told them, Hadley turning to me with a frown.

"You can bring Vinny, we'll keep Seth on a leash," Hadley said, jutting out her bottom lip. Darren looked between his girlfriend and me with a look of confusion.

"You want to bring Vinny?" Darren asked me.

It didn't occur to me that Hadley hadn't told him about us. While at first the two of us were keeping quiet about our relationship, we really weren't anymore. We weren't making out in the hallways or posting each other all over social media, but with the subtle touches and longing glances, people knew. It wasn't a secret.

"They're dating, Darren," Hadley said. "God, how behind are you?"

"Oh," Darren said, a bit of shock on his face as he looked over at me. "Wow. I didn't know that."

"We weren't really telling people for a little bit," I said, sliding my hands into my pockets.

"Well, he's more than welcome to come," he replied.

"I think we'll stay in," I said with a tight smile.

I missed out on the afternoon and early evening with Vinny, I didn't want to miss out all night too. And he wouldn't go to a party anyway, not that I wanted him to. I would be more than happy staying in, tangled up with each other in Vinny's sheets.

Since we had found a way to sort of solve Vinny's little problem, we had been eager to continue going further. We were still moving slowly, only going as far as Vinny was comfortable with, but it was still enjoyable for both of us to say the least.

Needless to say, I was relieved to finally be back at the Taylor's house after leaving the field.

Hadley had gone directly to Darren's house with him while the others met up at Dana's to get ready for the party, leaving me alone at the Taylor's with Vinny.

He was down on the couch when I walked in the front door. When he saw me, he jumped up, his chest heaving.

"You scared the fuck out of me," he said, his hand on his chest.

"I'm sorry," I replied, my mouth muffled against his neck as I sat down beside him on the couch and pulled him to me. "How can I make it up to you?"

Vinny chuckled and moved so that he was straddling my lap. He placed his hand on the center of my chest and lightly pushed me down so that I was flat on my back on the couch. He leaned over me and started kissing up my throat.

"I missed you today," he said with his lips against my skin.

I let out a shuddered breath as he sucked on my sensitive skin.

"I missed you," I breathed out. "I would have much rather been here."

He hummed in agreement, moving his lips to my jaw then finally catching my lips with his. I let out a content sigh as Vinny opened his mouth for me to explore. My hands found their way under his shirt as he deepened the kiss, our tongues eagerly meeting. I lifted his shirt slowly, my hands sneaking up his back.

Vinny's hips were grinding down on mine and I couldn't contain the small sounds of pleasure that followed. He took complete control, my body only responding to him. He snuck his hand under my shirt, resting it on my stomach before moving it lower.

"Your grandmother is driving me up a fucking wall," Jeff's voice called out, startling both Vinny and I.

Vinny immediately jumped off of me and stood on the other side of the couch before I could even realize what had happened. My shirt was still up, exposing my stomach as I continued lying on the couch.

I kept my eyes away from Jeff and turned to Vinny, who stood on the other side of the room with wide eyes and swollen lips.

"I thought you weren't going to be home until later," Vinny said, breathlessly as he ran his fingers through his messy hair.

"You know I can only handle that woman in small doses," Jeff retorted as I sat up on the couch, still not meeting his eyes. "And I'm glad I came home to stop you two from having sex on my couch."

" *Dad* ," Vinny exasperatedly hissed.

"You'd be surprised at the amount of times I've caught Logan and Dana," Jeff said, shaking his head and taking a seat beside me on the couch. "Those two never learn."

I couldn't even look at Jeff. Not just because he had caught me making out with his son, but also because I could feel him silently judging me for still being with him. I didn't want to have another confrontation with him. I didn't want to see him at all.

"Anyway, I had to get out of there when your grandmother started talking about my dad and how much Robbie reminded her of him," Jeff grumbled, switching on the TV. "Trying to make me feel guilty."

Vinny sighed. "But you won't so I don't know why she tries."

"She'll be persistent until the day she dies, and then she'll probably haunt me after she's gone."

I stood up from the couch and walked over to Vinny whose face was still flushed from either embarrassment or what we had been doing before being caught.

Jeff didn't say anything else as Vinny clutched my hand in his and led me up the stairs to his bedroom, closing and locking the door behind us.

"My mom's out with her friends tonight," Vinny said, sitting down on the bed. "Girls night. Dad was supposed to be at Grandma's for a while."

"It's fine," I told him, taking the spot beside him and resting my hand on his thigh.

Vinny groaned, looking up at the ceiling. "It's just... I wanted to be alone with you. I haven't been doing well the last few days."

"You haven't?" I eyed him with concern.

It wasn't a surprise to me, considering Logan had told me about what had happened with Seth, but it was still hard to hear it. It was hard to hear that he had been suffering and I hadn't noticed.

Vinny let out a humorless chuckle. "I guess I'm never really doing well."

"That's not true."

He finally moved his eyes from the ceiling to look at me.

"Sometimes you have rough days, everyone does," I continued. "There's no shame in that."

Vinny looked down at my hand on his leg, then placed his hand over mine.

"Why didn't you go out with your friends?" His eyes met mine again.

"I wanted to be with you," I said, my voice almost a whisper like I was afraid to overwhelm him. I was so aware of how much he meant to me, of how much I wanted him, that my body took notice in making sure to keep him close, to keep him from falling through my grasp.

"I don't want you to miss out on things because of me," he said after a beat of nothing but a longing stare between us.

"I'm not, trust me," I said. "I don't want to go to Darren's parties. Especially not with Seth there."

Vinny stared for a moment, his hand slipping off of mine and his lips parting slightly.

"Did Logan tell you about Seth?" he asked. "About what happened in the locker room?"

I nodded. "He did, and I get why you didn't, so don't worry."

He didn't want me to know that Seth had tried to hurt him. Whether it was because he didn't want me worrying or he didn't want me ever bringing it up so he could move on, didn't matter. I understood that. It just made me worry about the other times Seth had undoubtedly tried something on him. The times no one walked in on that stayed a silent secret between the two of them. I didn't want to think about it, so I didn't ask.

Vinny nodded. "I don't want to talk about that asshole."

"Me neither."

That was all it took for Vinny to throw himself in my lap and start kissing me. I laughed into the kiss, lying back on the bed and pulling him on top of me. We stayed like that for a few moments before I switched our position.

Vinny was now on his back underneath me. My hand was next to his head, holding myself up over him as I kept my lips on his. I sat up after a moment, fumbling with his jeans. The look on his face told me to keep going, so I pulled his jeans down and began kissing up his thighs.

That was when I saw it.

Five circles, burns, in a line on the top of his thigh.

I immediately pulled away, looking down at him with a frown.

"Vinny, what are those?" I asked, my voice tight and rough.

He sent me a look of confusion, his eyebrows lifting on his forehead before the realization struck. He sat up and I moved off of him before he pulled his jeans back up.

"It's nothing, Carson, drop it," Vinny bit out, buttoning his pants, his eyes avoiding me.

"Those are burns from a cigarette, I'm not stupid," I snapped. I kept my voice quiet, not wanting Jeff to overhear us.

Vinny looked at me, his mouth etched in a frown and his eyes fiery with a subtle rage.

I had never snapped at him before. I didn't like the feeling.

But that didn't matter. I was concerned, angry, confused, and *hurt* about what I had just saw. My heart squeezed in my chest as I thought back on it, about what had caused him to do that, about how low he must have felt when he did.

I couldn't stomach it.

" *Please* ," I whispered, my voice cracking. " *Please* tell me why."

"It doesn't matter," he said, shaking his head. "I did it when I wasn't feeling great and it was stupid so let's just forget about it, okay?"

I nodded, but I didn't think I could.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please tell me what you thought of the chapter! About the football game and Darren and Seth? And afterward with Vinny and Carson? What about Jeff catching them and what happened after?

36

TRIGGER WARNING: mention of self harm

Carson Hughes

"I need to talk to you."

Jeff turned away from the stove at the sound of my voice, his eyebrows raised in question.

No matter what Vinny said, I couldn't forget about what I had seen. There was a sick feeling in my stomach, like everything I had ever eaten was trying to leap out, at the thought of the marks Vinny had placed on his body. The image of them never left my head. It lurked, making me keenly aware of the implications of those marks.

Vinny needed help. And my kind words and support could only do so much for him. I was stupid to think otherwise. I should have noticed that his "moods" were not really just that, and his tendency to put himself in dangerous situations was not just a quirk about him. Vinny's struggles were more serious than I had originally thought, and it felt like a punch to the stomach to realize how much he had been suffering and how wrong I had been to brush it off.

That was why I had taken the opportunity to seek out Jeff when Vinny fell asleep beside me on his bed. I couldn't bear to look at him as he slept so peacefully and even if he hated me after today, I knew this was what I had to do.

"What up, Carson?" Jeff asked after I hesitated for a moment.

"It's about Vinny," I said, clearing my throat after my voice cracked. "You have to promise not to freak out."

That caused Jeff to put down the utensil he had in his hand and turn the stove down to low, turning to give me his full attention. I always knew Jeff cared about his children a lot. He just had a weird way of showing it sometimes. But I knew the thought of something being wrong with his son scared him, and I wondered how he didn't notice or do something about the change in Vinny before.

"Why would I freak out?" he asked, bracing his hands on the counter behind him.

"Because it's going to be upsetting."

Jeff's gaze turned to one more serious than I had ever seen on him. His eyes were locked on me like nothing could tear them away. I spoke up as he remained silent, waiting for what I had to say.

"I saw some marks on him," I said, my voice coming out shakier than I intended. "Burns on his legs. That he did to himself."

Jeff was silent for another moment, his expression unchanging. Then, he stood up straighter and walked over to me.

"You should go, Carson," he said in a low tone.

"Jeff—"

"You should go because I'm going to go up there and see what you're talking about and he's going to be angry at both of us."

My breath caught in my throat. I didn't want to leave him here. Even if he was going to scream at me, I would rather him tell me he wanted me to leave than make him feel like I left him.

"I know he's going to be mad but..." I trailed. "I'm staying."

Jeff shook his head at me as he walked by toward the kitchen doorway.

"You did the right thing telling me," he said before he left the room and went toward the stairs.

I stood stuck in place, dreading what would happen next. The house was silent except for the ticking of the kitchen clock and the sound of water boiling on the stove.

I didn't hear Jeff go into Vinny's room, but I heard the explosion after.

***

Vinny Taylor

I was lightly shaken awake, expecting for it to be Carson. I rubbed my eyes as I opened them to see Dad sitting on the edge of my bed with a look of concern. And I knew why.

I sat up and crossed my arms over my chest, immediately going into defensive mode. I should have known Carson would tell him. I should have never been so stupid and caught up in Carson that I forgot what he would see if he got me undressed.

"Vin..." Dad trailed, noticing how I inches away from him. "It's obvious we both know why I'm up here."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

That was bullshit, we both knew it. But bullshit was what I was good at. Dad just happened to be the one person that could always see right through me. The two of us could usually dance around a subject until a real confrontation happened, but something told me that wouldn't be happening here.

"Then I'm just going to ask you," he said. "Did you harm yourself?"

"Why are you asking me that?" I challenged.

"You know why," he retorted with raised eyebrows. "And I know you, Vinny. It doesn't seem like a far fetched idea that you'd do it."

"You don't know anything about me!" I exclaimed, standing up from the bed. Dad jumped back slightly, startled at my outburst.

"Vincent," Dad said in a calm tone, standing up slowly. "I think it's time we take you to see someone. Your mother and I have been talking about that for a little while now and I think it's time we finally bite the bullet and do it."

"Like taking me to a fucking therapist? You think I'm fucking crazy?"

"Seeing a therapist doesn't mean you're crazy," he said. "It just means you need some help that I can't give you."

"You don't even try to help me!" I screamed. "I don't need help! I need you to leave me alone!"

"I don't try to help you?" Dad asked. "Vinny, I don't know how! We should have done this a long time ago. I'll take responsibility for waiting this long —"

"I'm not going to a fucking therapist!" I snapped. "I'm not letting you treat me like I'm insane!"

My head started throbbing from how loud I was yelling.

"Vincent, please calm down."

I ignored him, leaving the bedroom and stomping down the stairs only to come in contact with Carson walking out of the kitchen. He stopped for a moment, a look of concern on his face, before he started to say something.

"Vinny—"

"So I can't trust you now?" I snapped and I couldn't find it in me to care about the sad look on his face when I did.

I wanted to dump him and tell him to leave me alone forever. But I couldn't because I didn't really want that and I didn't want to be the reason for his sadness. No matter how angry I felt, and I was *angry* , I still couldn't lose him.

But now I felt like I couldn't tell him anything. All the trust we built up over the time we had been together vanished. I didn't want him to see any part of

me that I tried to keep hidden. I couldn't let him see me vulnerable. Not anymore.

"Vinny, I didn't know what to do," he started, moving closer to me, but I backed away. "I was worried and scared for you!"

"It was a one time thing, Carson!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands up. "I told you I just did it while I wasn't feeling great and you went off to tell my dad as soon as I wasn't looking!"

"But when does a one time thing turn into something more than that?" he asked. I didn't have a good answer for him, but I was too angry to let him know he had bested me.

"It doesn't matter!" I yelled, pointing a finger at him. " *You* broke my trust."

"I'd rather break your trust than let something happen to you!"

I felt tears stinging my eyes. I let out a frustrated groan and looked away from Carson as I rubbed my eyes and made my way to the door.

"Vinny wait!" he called out just before I walked out and slammed the door shut behind me.

***

The stupid tree in the park wasn't just mine anymore. I had shared it with Carson and because of that, it was filled with memories of him, of the conversations we'd had, and of the way he looked with the glow of the stars shining against his skin.

Sitting up in the tree was too different without him now. It no longer had the same effect on me as it did when he was sitting there beside me.

I knew that he knew exactly where I was, but he still didn't come. Not that I wanted him to. As persistent and bold as Carson was, he knew when I needed my space. He knew me too well sometimes.

I didn't know how long I stayed at the park, but it had gotten a lot cooler out by the time I started walking home. I tried not to let my mind wander to what could happen with me being out and alone in the dark, but the thoughts came anyway, so I ran the rest of the way.

When I got back to the house, Carson's car was gone. I didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

Mom and Dad were sitting in the living room, Luna on the couch between them, like they had been waiting for me. Their eyes were on me as soon as I walked in. I couldn't bear to look at my mother who had already sniffled at the sight of me.

"Vinny," Mom cried and I slowly brought my eyes to her tear stained cheeks. Seeing her cry was one of the worst feelings in the fucking world.

She got up from the couch and immediately pulled me into her arms. I felt the tears stinging at my eyes as she held me to her tightly like I would vanish into thin air if she let go. I put my arms around her and lowered my face to the crook of her neck as she soothingly rubbed her hand on my back. I hated making her feel like this.

"I'm so sorry," she cried. "I'm so sorry I didn't notice sooner. I failed you."

"No you didn't," I muttered into her shoulder.

If there was one person in the world who could effortlessly get my defenses down, it was her. The tears spilled out of my eyes without warning. I had spent all night holding them in and putting my walls up around me, but one look at my mother and the sound of her wilting voice knocked them down.

"We're going to get you help, okay?" she sniffled, pulling away from me only slightly, keeping her hands on my shoulders as she looked into my eyes. "I know you may not want it, but we need to do this, okay?"

All I could do was nod.

"There is *nothing* wrong with you," she continued, her voicing gain back its strength. "This isn't because something is wrong, it's because you need help with finding a way of coping with your emotions that doesn't harm you."

"I know, Mom."

"I don't blame you for coping in the way that you did," she said, pulling me closer. "That's not your fault, but we need to find a healthier outlet."

I nodded again, looking down at the floor.

It wasn't until I had already gone up to my room that Dad decided he wanted to talk to me again. I was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling when he walked in and sat down beside me.

"I was going to go to sleep," I muttered, though that was a lie.

"I don't know how to tell you I'm sorry for not helping you sooner," Dad said, ignoring my words. He probably saw right through them. "I think I had convinced myself that this was just a phase you would eventually get over, but that was wrong of me."

"Okay."

He sighed, running his hand down his face. "You were right earlier, when you said I never tried to help you. I thought I was, but it was never in the way you needed it and I'm sorry."

I glanced over at him, my head never leaving my pillow. He let out a quiet laugh.

"You know, when we took you in I swore I was never going to let anything happen to you," he started. "You were only three and you had already dealt with enough with Robbie. And you were so innocent and cute and I wanted to protect you from everything."

He looked down at me like he was reminiscing, remembering how I looked over the years, how he raised me. I knew he was always harder on me than he was on Logan because he was worried about how I might end up. He

was worried that pieces of Robbie would show up in me as I got older and he wanted to do anything to prevent that. I thought part of him worried I had some trauma from Robbie, and maybe I did, but I didn't remember any of it.

"Dad..." I trailed. "I really don't want to talk about my issues right now, okay?" I was doing my best to keep my cool. I had blown up at him enough for one day.

"We don't have to, I just..." he sighed. "I just want you to understand me, where I'm coming from. And I want to understand you."

"Maybe we can talk about it after I start going to therapy."

I didn't sound happy about it, and I wasn't, but Dad looked relieved that I acknowledged going. Or that I wasn't giving him a hard time about it.

We were silent for a few moments, Dad making no move to leave, before he spoke up again.

"I don't think you should be angry with Carson," he said in a low tone. "For him to keep that a secret for you... that would put a lot of pressure on him and obviously it's important for your health."

The thought of all the pressure I put on Carson made my chest feel heavy. I hated myself for it, and for expecting too much of him.

"Your relationship is none of my business," Dad continued and I let out a snort. "But don't blame him for this."

Going back to normal with Carson was not going to be easy. I felt blind-sided by him. The rug had been pulled from under me and he was the one who did it.

I didn't know where we could go from here.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think of the chapter? Do you think Carson was right for telling Jeff? Is Vinny justified in being angry? What do you think this means for their relationship?

37

TRIGGER WARNING : **mention of self harm**

Vinny Taylor

To say things were rocky between Carson and me over the last week was an understatement. We hadn't spent much time alone at all, and when we did, it was spent making out and not talking. I could tell he felt guilty about what had happened, but any time I thought he was going to bring it up, I just changed the subject or kissed him.

It made me a coward, but at that point I didn't care. I would rather him forget about what happened and for the two of us to go back to normal, but it wasn't that easy. I still felt some anger toward him, he felt guilty, and now there was a lack of trust between us.

Logan seemed to think that us going out with he and Dana would solve some of our problems, so that was where I was being forced to go after being forced to my first therapy session on Friday afternoon.

Dad got out of work early to bring me to therapy. He had called all over, trying to get me a spot as soon as possible and eventually found one that was taking new patients. Either he wanted to be here for moral support or he didn't trust me enough to drive myself to therapy.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as we sat in the waiting room.

"Fine," I replied, my tone slightly agitated.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

I let out a sigh. "No, Dad."

I wouldn't call what I was feeling at the moment nerves. It was more like discomfort and dread. I didn't want to talk about my feelings. I didn't want

someone asking me a bunch of questions.

"Vincent Taylor?" a petite woman called out. "Dr. Brown is ready for you."

"I'll wait right here for you," Dad said as I stood up from the chair. I nodded at him before following the woman out of the waiting room and down the hall where a taller woman stepped out of an office.

"Is this Vincent?" she asked, looking between me and the other woman with a kind smile.

I nodded at the woman who I assumed was Dr. Brown.

"My name is Annalise Brown," she said, extending her hand for me to shake. "You can call me Annalise or Dr. Brown, either is fine."

I shook her hand. "I go by Vinny."

"Great," she said, opening her office door. "Come on in, Vinny."

As I walked into her office, I looked around the room. The walls were painted a muted tan, but there were numerous colorful paintings hanging up. There was an overwhelming amount of places to sit. A couch was pushed up against the far wall and there were all sorts of different chairs littered throughout the room.

"Please sit anywhere you're comfortable," Dr. Brown said. "Or you can stand if that's most comfortable."

I sat down at the chair in front of her desk. Dr. Brown dragged her chair from behind the desk and sat across from me so that we were both in front of it, no barrier between us. I couldn't tell if I was comforted by the act or put on edge.

"So, Vinny," Dr. Brown started, crossing one of her legs over the other. "What's your favorite thing to do?"

The confusion I felt must have shown on my face because Dr. Brown let out a laugh.

"I like to get to know the people I'm going to be working with," she said. "All of this is a lot more meaningful when it's about *all* of you, not just about the parts of you you're here for."

My mind blanked. I couldn't exactly tell my therapist that my favorite things to do included making out with my boyfriend and smoking cigarettes out of my bedroom window.

"I like to run I guess," I said, glancing over at the clock. It had only been a minute.

"Do you run competitively?"

"Used to," I said. "Not anymore."

She nodded. "What else do you like?"

"Reading."

"Favorite book?"

"Anything by Toni Morrison."

"Great choice," she said. "My personal favorite is *Song of Solomon.* "

We continued with casual conversation for the next few minutes. She recommended I read *Kindred* by Octavia Butler and I told her about how I hated the movie version of *Beloved* . It went like this for a little while before it started to feel like an actual therapy session.

"Vinny, why don't you tell me about what you hope to gain from our sessions?" Dr. Brown asked. She had this look on her face that showed me I had her undivided attention.

I shrugged. "I don't really know."

She gave me an understanding nod. "What about why you're here?"

"My parents want me to be," I said. Dr. Brown didn't say anything. She just looked at me like she was waiting for me to say more. "Because I harmed myself."

"Are you angry with your parents for wanting you to come here?"

I let out a deep breath. "I don't know. Not angry I guess. It put us in an awkward spot."

"How so?"

"We've been in an awkward spot for a while," I continued. "Feels like they think I'm unstable and they don't trust me."

"What I've found is that sometimes it's not that parents don't trust their children," Dr. Brown answered. "It's that they're so concerned with keeping you safe, they hold you too close. They forget at your age that you're blossoming into a young adult and sheltering you won't work."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"When would you say your relationship with your parents changed?" she asked.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly when, and I also didn't want to delve into all my trauma on the first therapy session. It would be too much.

"Over the summer," I told her. "Early July."

Dr. Brown nodded and let out a hum, but she didn't respond to my words. Instead, it seemed like she was waiting for me to continue as if I had more to say than that.

"I think it would be good to have some family sessions as well," Dr. Brown said after a few moments of silence. "It's easy for parents to think that you're the only reason for the struggles that you face rather than the family dynamic as a whole. I'll talk to your father about it."

She got up from her chair and pulled a folder out of her desk to get a piece of paper before handing it to me.

"I'd like you to fill out this questionnaire and bring it with you to our next session," she said. "I think it'll be beneficial for both of us."

The hour was up sooner than I realized and Dr. Brown walked me out of her office and back to the waiting room where Dad was reading a magazine. He stood once he realized we had walked into the room and shook Dr. Brown's hand.

"Hi, I'm Vinny's father, Jeff," Dad introduced himself.

"I'm Annalise Brown," Dr. Brown kindly responded. "I'd like to speak with you about doing some family sessions. Can I reach you on the number you provided the office?"

Dad let the surprise show on his face for only a moment. "Yes, of course."

Dr. Brown looked back at me. "If you need anything, Vinny, feel free to call my direct line, okay?"

She said goodbye to Dad and I before walking out of the waiting room. The two of us left the building and went back to his car. Once we were on our way home, Dad spoke up.

"So, how did it go?" he asked.

"I don't have to talk about therapy with you," I told him, glaring over at him as he drove.

"I'm just asking how it went, not what you talked about."

"It was fine," I muttered, leaning my head against the window.

"Just fine?"

"What do you want me to say?" I snapped. "It was a grand old time. I want to go everyday."

"Vin..." Dad sighed. "You don't have to do that, you know."

"Do what?" I spat.

"Get so defensive!"

I shook my head and crossed my arms over my chest, staring out the window with the hope of communicating to him that I was done talking.

"Are you still planning on going out tonight?" he asked.

"Yeah," I uttered.

"Keep the attitude and you won't."

"You'd be doing me a favor."

"Then never mind," he said. "Do you know why she wants to do family sessions?"

I shot him a look of disbelief. "Are you serious? We're literally sitting in the car fighting and you're wondering why a therapist might want to see us?"

"I just didn't expect that," he told me. "We're going to do it if she's recommending it."

"Great," I replied with an eye roll.

"Don't be so cynical, Vin," he said. "I know I have some stuff to work on, particularly when it comes to you. This could be good for us."

I scoffed, turning my gaze back toward the window and we sat in silence for the rest of the ride home. Carson's car was already parked outside the house when we got there and I didn't know whether to be happy or annoyed. Every part of me wanted to move past what had happened, but my mind wouldn't let me. It was stuck on the feelings of anger and betrayal.

Another car was parked in the driveway and I let out a loud groan when I realized whose it was.

"What the fuck is Grandma doing here?" I asked as Dad parked next to her.

"I don't know," he grumbled. "But it can't be good. I have to go in and save whoever she's bothering in there."

It turned out she was bothering Logan, Dana, Carson, and Mom. The four of them sat in silence while Grandma talked about God knows what. Mom smiled when she saw the two of us walk in and immediately came over to pull me into her embrace, interrupting Grandma's words.

"Oh good, you're here," Grandma said.

"Hi, honey," Mom whispered to me as she pulled me tightly against her.

"What are you doing here, Ma?" Dad asked Grandma with a sigh.

"Well, when you told me about Vincent's therapy I had to come here because I think you're going crazy!" she exclaimed, standing from the couch.

I pulled away from Mom and turned to glare at Dad.

"Do you have to tell everyone under the fucking sun?" I snapped at him. "Who else knows? Your golf buddies? My second grade teacher?"

"Vinny, enough," he said, holding his hand out in a gesture for me to stop, then turned to his mother. "Mom, it's none of your business."

"You are *crazy*, Jeffrey!"

"I must get it from you!

"Vincent doesn't need therapy," she said, ignoring his insult. "He needs his father who has been through hard times that can help him."

Dad scoffed. "Robbie went to rehab, Ma. I'm pretty sure he went to therapy there."

I shook my head, not wanting to hear any more of this. Carson followed me out of the room and up the stairs. The two of us wordlessly went into my bedroom and I immediately shoved Carson against my bedroom door as I shut it and put his lips on mine. He let out a surprised sound but responded to the kiss anyway.

It was sick, really. I didn't want to speak to Carson, but I wanted his mouth over mine and his hands all over me. I wanted to be angry with him but I couldn't resist him.

Carson pulled his mouth from mine, so I began kissing his neck and up to his jaw.

"Are you okay?" he asked me in a soft voice.

"Don't wanna talk," I muttered against his skin. He let out a shuttering breath.

"What—"

"Shut up, Carson," I spat, taking my mouth off of him. "Either shut up and kiss me or get the fuck out."

He narrowed his eyes at me and pushed me away. "Don't talk to me like that!"

"That's just how I talk." I backed away and rolled my eyes.

"Not to me," he said.

Deep down, I knew he was right. I shouldn't speak so harshly to him, but I couldn't get over my anger.

"Why don't I just tell Logan and Dana we aren't going tonight?" Carson suggested, shoving a hand through his hair. "It's probably not a good idea anyway."

I scoffed. "Good luck canceling on Dana."

"Well, what other choice do I have?" he asked in an exasperated tone. "You can barely stand the sight of me and I can't stand you speaking to me like you hate me."

That caused a cracking feeling in my chest.

I let out a long sigh and went over to my window after getting my cigarettes from under the bed.

"That's not true. I like looking at you," I said, sitting on the window sill and lighting a cigarette.

Carson let out a quiet laugh as he sat across from me on my bed.

"I'm just trying to keep it together, Carson," I said, blowing smoke out the window. "I know I've been shitty and it's not fair to you but I can't just get over what happened."

"What could I have done?" he asked, looking desperate. "How could I have made sure you got help without you hating me for it?"

"I don't hate you," I quickly replied. "You could have talked to me first, Carson."

"You would have tried to convince me to keep quiet," he said. "Either way you would have been angry with me."

I didn't say anything because he was right. And that made it all the more frustrating that I couldn't stop myself from feeling angry.

"Don't cancel on Dana," I said with a sigh, stubbing out my cigarette in the ash tray. "I'll behave."

Carson looked as if he didn't believe me but didn't say anything to disagree. I stood up from the window sill and closed the window before going over to my dresser.

"What should I wear?" I asked, opening a drawer.

Carson stood beside me and peered into the drawer before pulling out a pair of dark jeans and handing them to me. He then went to my closet and picked out a dark blue shirt from the hanger.

"You look good in blue," he said as he handed me the shirt.

"Then I'll wear blue."

We didn't exchange any words as I changed my clothes, but the silence between us wasn't filled with as much tension. We were both trying not to be angry at the other.

The anger could be put aside for the night.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

38

Carson Hughes

Canceling on Dana was impossible.

That was how I ended up walking through a corn maze that night with Dana, Logan, and Vinny. What I really didn't expect was to be walking with Logan while Dana and Vinny walked ahead of us, each holding a hot cocoa in their hands.

Apparently it was the last weekend for the haunted corn maze since Halloween had just passed, and Dana was mad that she and Logan hadn't gone at all this year. However, I could tell that wasn't the only thing Dana was mad about.

"I don't know, man, she's been acting weird," Logan said when I asked him about it. "We've been fighting more than usual."

The fact that the two were fighting at all was jarring. They had always been so good together and it was strange to think that was changing.

"About what?" I asked, glancing over at him and away from our significant others walking ahead.

"Stupid stuff," he said with a frustrated sigh. "I don't pay enough attention to her, but we also spend too much time together, we have sex too much, but not enough. It's weird."

I wished my problems with Vinny were as mundane as that.

"I love her and I want to stay with her," Logan continued as the two walked further and further ahead of us. "But I don't know if she... maybe she doesn't love me anymore? I don't know. I hate talking about this."

Part of me felt like a bad friend for not knowing what to say to Logan. He was the one experienced in relationships, not me. My relationship was barely staying afloat while his had been steady for three years.

"I honestly think part of it is because of Hadley and Darren," Logan told me in a low tone, not that the others ahead would be able to hear us.

"Why?"

"They're in their honeymoon phase," Logan said, a sharp breath leaving his mouth and causing a cloud to form in front of us. "He does whatever she wants. Literally, Darren follows Hadley around like a puppy and their relationship is new and exciting."

"I think you're just speculating," I told him after his words trailed off into silence.

"Maybe," he said. "But if she dumps me, be prepared to see me mope like you've never seen before."

I let out a laugh, tucking my hands into my pockets. "We might be in the same boat."

"No, we won't," he instantly replied. "He may be mad now, but the fact that he didn't dump you on the spot is saying something."

I had tried convincing myself of that, but it didn't seem to be the case. If Vinny eventually decided he couldn't move on from what I did, then he would end up dumping me. This was just a trial period, seeing if we could move on from this bump in the road, but only time would tell.

We had eventually walked far enough into the maze that we were at the actual scary part. Dana and Vinny stopped to wait for us before entering the darker part of the maze where screams of joy, or terror, could be heard.

Dana caught Logan's hand in hers when we caught up to them. I wanted nothing more than to reach for Vinny's, but I didn't. He had to be the one to initiate those things because if I tried to, it might only push him away.

Vinny walked silently beside me as we entered the "haunted" part of this maze.

I had been here before with my friends a few times. There was one time Archie got so scared he jumped on top of Isaac and Isaac basically had to carry him out of there. Of course, Archie always denied this. He tried to convince everyone that he got light headed and thought he was going to pass out, but no one believed him. Especially not after seeing the way he jumped and screamed after being scared by some guy with a fake chainsaw.

As we walked through the maze now, Dana jumped every time she heard a noise and squished herself closer to Logan. Vinny started walking closer to me and I tried not to let myself get my hopes too high that he would eventually hold my hand.

We rounded a corner and a man with fake blood splattered all over his face jumped out at us, causing Dana to let out a shrill scream immediately followed by a giggle. Vinny reached out and gripped my arm but released it almost immediately.

However, when another person came out from the corn right beside him, Vinny jumped into me and grabbed onto my arm again, spilling some of his hot cocoa on his hand. He hissed at the burning liquid on his skin.

"Shit, are you okay?" I asked, leading him away from the person who just scared us.

"I'm fine," he said, shaking the liquid off his hand. His other hand continued gripping my arm as we kept going. "Let's never let Dana force us into this dumb shit again."

I didn't want to let the hope show on my face, but what he said made it seem like he expected us to be together long enough to run the risk of Dana forcing us back to the haunted corn maze next year.

"Next time we do the day time maze," I said with a small smile forming on my face.

"Or just stay away from anything haunted in general," he replied and just as he finished speaking, a person dressed as a scarecrow jumped out in front of us, causing the two of us to flinch back.

Vinny dropped his hot cocoa on the ground and moved his hand from my arm to grip my hand before quickly pulling me through the rest of the maze.

"I'm done with this shit," he said as we passed Dana and Logan.

I smiled when we exited the maze and Vinny's hand stayed in mine.

"I needed to get out of there before I accidentally started throwing punches," he said as we waited at the exit for the others.

"I'm sure you wouldn't be the only one that did that," I told him.

"That stupid scarecrow made me drop my cocoa," Vinny complained with a shiver. He hadn't brought anything more than a thin sweatshirt with him and since we were still in an awkward place, I hadn't tried to get him to bring something heavier.

I would have been lying if I said I put on a jacket over my sweatshirt in case he would need it. I wished I was that thoughtful, but I still released Vinny's hand from mine and took the jacket off to hand it over to him.

He gave me a strange look, eyes darting from the jacket in my hands then back up to my face.

"Take it," I said. "You're shivering."

Vinny reluctantly took the jacket from me and put it on. It was a little big on him, the sleeves reaching past his hands, but at least it would keep him warm while we were outside.

"I might keep this," he said after a moment, pulling my arm around him as he lodged himself at my side. "It's comfy."

"You can have it," I said, pulling him close.

"I was just kidding," he said, his lips quirking up slightly.

"You guys left us in there!" Dana exclaimed as she pulled Logan from the maze.

"This is the last time I let you pick where we're going," Vinny told her with a pointed look. She let go of Logan's hand and held her arm out to Vinny. He looped his arm through hers and let my arm fall from his shoulders as the two walked ahead of us toward the concession stand.

Logan and I shared looks of confusion.

"Are they becoming friends or something?" he asked as we followed behind them.

"Seems that way."

"I can't tell if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

I watched as Vinny laughed at something Dana said. It was one of his real laughs, the one that makes his eyes crinkle from his smile. There was no way I could look at that and think of it as something negative.

"A good thing I think," I told Logan as we began to catch up to them.

We all ended up getting hot ciders and finding a picnic table to sit at as we drank. Dana and Vinny sat on one side while Logan and I sat across from them.

"Is that Isaac over there?" Dana pointed out, gesturing behind us.

Logan and I turned around and sure enough, Isaac was standing near the concession stand. With his arm around Spencer. I looked away as the two shared a kiss and my eyes landed on Vinny who was staring at them with a strange expression.

"Oh my God is he dating Spencer?" Dana asked in a rushed out whisper.

"Apparently!" Logan replied in an exasperated tone.

"Did he ever say anything about it?"

"No!" Logan said before turning to me. "Did he tell you?"

I shook my head. "He never said anything. Neither has Spencer."

I hadn't really seen Spencer since the night Vinny had dinner at my house and he showed up with Paul, but who knew how long he and Isaac had been seeing each other.

"Should we say something or act like we didn't see them?" Dana asked, her tone still hushed as she stared at them.

"Stop staring," Logan hissed. "Just leave them alone, Isaac will say something when he's ready."

I glanced over at Vinny again as he took a sip of cider. His expression was now blank, not giving away how he felt about seeing Spencer. The two of us hadn't spoken about Spencer since our fight about it, but I now realized we were going to have to talk about him eventually, especially if Spencer ended up being my stepbrother one day.

"Do you want to leave?" I asked Vinny quietly, though Logan and Dana still heard.

"I'm fine, Carson," he muttered with narrowed eyes.

"Oh shit, Isaac saw me," Dana said, ducking her head as if that would make her invisible.

Logan and I turned around to see that Isaac was now looking over at us with a hard expression. He said something to Spencer before starting to walk over to us alone.

"Well, this is awkward," Isaac said once he was standing in front of us.

"Just act like we aren't here!" Dana said, lifting her head back up. "Go enjoy your date. We're not even here."

"It's not—" Isaac started before placing his hands on his hips and letting out a heavy sigh, briefly looking up at the sky before directing his attention back at us. "It's just a casual thing."

Isaac's gaze fell to Vinny, who looked up at him with raised eyebrows, and for some reason, that made me suddenly feel protective. It was a foreign feeling as I wanted to force Isaac to look anywhere but at him. I didn't know much about their history, and part of me never wanted to know, but I felt crazy for not even wanting the two to look at each other.

"It really didn't look like a casual thing," Dana remarked with a slight smirk. Isaac looked over at her with an unreadable expression.

"Well, it is," Isaac said, turning his gaze back to Vinny who shot him a glare.

"I don't know why you're trying to convince *me* of anything, Isaac," he snapped. "I really don't give a shit."

This made me realize I hadn't seen the two interact much at all other than now and maybe there was more to the two of them than either were letting on.

"I just don't want you to think he's going to start coming around and make things weird for you and Carson," Isaac replied after letting out another heavy sigh.

Vinny held his glare on Isaac, but didn't reply.

"It's fine, Isaac," I spoke up, causing both of them to look at me. "You don't have to worry about making things weird for us."

Of course, if he did start bringing Spencer around, it *would* make things weird for a while, but I didn't want that to be the reason he didn't pursue a relationship with him if that was what he wanted to do.

I got up from the picnic table and stood next to Isaac.

"I'm going to get more cider, does anyone want anything?" I asked the others. Vinny took one last sip of his drink before raising the cup, signaling he wanted another.

"Oh! Can you get some of those cinnamon donut sticks?" Dana asked in an excited tone. "I saw some people walking around with them and now I'm hardcore *craving them."*

"You got it," I told her before gesturing for Isaac to walk away with me.

"I'm sorry if it's weird," he mumbled, looking down on the ground as we walked. "I didn't expect any of you to find out."

"It's not weird," I denied. "But what's up with you and Vinny?" I hated even asking. I felt like an asshole for bringing it up, but the two seemed to have more tension between them than I had ever noticed.

"Nothing," Isaac instantly replied. "There was some weirdness with Spencer while Vinny and I were hooking up because Spencer wanted him obviously."

I grimaced at the reminder of Isaac and Vinny together.

"So Spencer didn't like me very much back then," he continued, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Well, he didn't like me at all while I was with Vinny. He wasn't, like, nasty to me or anything, but I could just tell."

I nodded and let out a hum.

"And I kinda convinced Vinny to give Spencer a shot," Isaac added, causing my eyes to widen. "And we all see how that turned out."

"Why would you do that?"

Isaac shrugged. "He and I were never together and I knew we wouldn't last and Spencer seemed like a good guy who obviously like Vinny so I just told him to try it. He didn't have to listen to me."

Maybe Vinny held some sort of resentment toward Isaac for that.

"So how did you end up with Spencer?" I wondered.

"Again, I'm not with him," Isaac corrected me. "We have a class together and started talking."

I wasn't going to mention that I had saw them kissing.

"And I'm the only single one out of all of us, so it's kinda nice to have someone," Isaac added.

I wanted to tell him that if he truly wanted to be with Isaac, I would support him, but we had reached the concession stand where Spencer stood before I had the chance.

"Hey, Spencer," I greeted, holding my hand up in a wave.

"Hey," he awkwardly replied. His hands were fidgeting in front of him like he wished he had something to do with them as a distraction.

"Haven't seen you in a while," I remarked.

He nodded. "My mom was in town for a little while between jobs, so I was spending time with her."

"Well, it's good to see you," I said truthfully, even though it was under unexpected circumstances.

However, I looked at him differently now that I knew the truth behind what had happened with him and Vinny and how what Spencer had done had broken him. I didn't know if I would ever be able to look at him the same knowing that. I was sure he had his reasons, whether they were good ones or not.

I walked away from the two of them, telling them both I would see them later. I held eye contact with Isaac for an extra moment before turning away to order more cider and Dana's donut sticks. I took the ciders and donut sticks in a tray before making my way back to the picnic table, only to be stopped by a brunette girl about my age.

"Hey, you need help with any of that?" she asked. She placed her hand on my arm as she spoke. I looked at her, trying to see if I could place her face somewhere in my mind. I soon decided she looked familiar, though I didn't think we had ever spoken and I didn't know her name.

"I'm good thanks," I said with a smile, causing her to blush. That wasn't a good sign.

"You're Carson, right?" she asked and I nodded. "I'm Emelia. We go to school together."

We did?

Emelia must have seen the confusion on my face because she let out a giggle, slightly throwing her head back as her hand still gripped my arm.

"I'm a junior," she explained.

"Oh, right," I said, though I didn't actually know that beforehand.

"Darren's little sister?" she continued.

Oh . That made more sense. I finally saw the resemblance between the two. They had the same gray eyes and pointed nose. I couldn't be sure if I recognized her because I had actually seen her before or if it was just because she looked like Darren.

"So, anyway, I was wondering if you maybe wanted to hang out sometime?" Emelia asked, moving closer to me as she rubbed her hand up and down my arm. "Since your friend is dating Darren and all... maybe we could hang out."

She started bringing her face closer to mine, though not in a way like she was trying to kiss me. More like she just wanted to be close to me, to make me nervous so I would say yes without thinking too hard about it.

Luckily, I was saved from the encounter when Vinny, Logan, and Dana walked up to us.

"We're leaving," Vinny snapped, setting a hard scowl on Emelia.

"Oh, hey Vinny," Emelia replied, backing away from me slightly, but still keeping her hand on my arm.

"Yeah, hey, what the fuck are you doing?" he asked, causing Emelia to look at him as if he was crazy.

" *Vinny* ," I said, stepping away from Emelia, her hand falling away.

He continued glaring at Emelia and she was so surprised by his actions that she couldn't even respond to him.

Vinny took the tray away from me and held it in one hand while grasping my hand with his other one and leading us away. Dana and Logan followed closely behind.

"Why are we leaving?" I asked as we continued toward the parking lot.

"Dana doesn't feel well," Vinny replied with a huff, stomping his feet as we walked.

I suddenly realized that I was experiencing a jealous Vinny and I couldn't help but smile down at him.

"You know I didn't even know who that girl was?" I asked him with a grin.

He shook his head at me. "If she touched you for one more second, I was going to start a fight."

I laughed at that.

"Thanks for saving me, Vinvin," I said, pulling his hand up to my lips to place a kiss on the back of it.

He grumbled incoherently as I briefly turned around to Dana and Logan.

"You don't want your donuts?" I asked Dana.

She shook her head, suddenly looking pale. "I don't feel good."

Logan had his arm around her with a panicked look on his face like he was worried she was going to pass out.

And with that, Vinny and I shared the donut sticks in the backseat of Logan's car while Dana moaned and held her stomach in the front seat and Logan glanced at her every couple of seconds as he drove.

"Did I tell you my therapist wants us to do family therapy?" Vinny asked once the two of us were lying in his bed later that night.

"No, you didn't," I said. I had my arm around him while he had his thrown over my stomach, his head on my chest.

"It's gonna be so awkward," he mumbled against me.

"Probably," I agreed and Vinny let out a laugh.

"Thanks for not trying to make me feel better about it."

"I'm sorry, I—"

"No, I mean it," he interrupted me. "Sometimes I just want you to agree with me."

Vinny had his eyes closed, his speech slurring a bit at the end as he dozed off.

I stayed up later that night, enjoying the feeling of him against me.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

39

Vinny Taylor

Family therapy was even more awkward than I thought it would be. Dad insisted on getting there early, so the four of us sat in the waiting room in silence for over half an hour before Dr. Brown was ready for our solo session. Then half an hour later we took a break and I waited with my family for another twenty minutes before Dr. Brown brought us back to her office.

She had the chairs set up in a circle when we entered. I sat between her and Logan, across from Dad who sat between Mom and Dr. Brown.

"I'm really glad you could all find the time to be here," Dr. Brown started. "I think this is important in not only Vinny's health, but the health of the family."

I tried to hold back my snort and got dirty looks from my parents when it slipped out. Logan was bouncing his knee beside me, resting his chin in his hand. The movement was all I could focus on.

"Can you fucking knock it off?" I hissed at him.

Logan glared at me but stopped his leg anyway. Now that the attention was on us, that was where Dr. Brown directed the conversation.

"Logan," she started. "How would you describe your relationship with Vinny and with each of your parents?"

Logan sat up straighter when Dr. Brown spoke to him and cleared his throat before answering.

"It's good," was all he said. I couldn't hold back my chuckle.

"You disagree, Vinny?" Dr. Brown asked, directing her gaze at me.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I'm sure Logan's relationship with our parents is fine."

"But not with you?"

Logan and I exchanged a glance and I couldn't tell what his expression meant. That was probably symbolic of our relationship as of late. The two of us didn't really know each other that well anymore. It went to show just how much could change in few short months.

"We're not really that close anymore," I told her, tearing my gaze away from Logan.

Dr. Brown nodded before turning her attention to my parents.

"Valerie, what is your relationship like with your sons?"

"They're the best boys in the world," she said with a sad smile. "I'd like to think I'm close with both of them, but Vinny has been drifting a bit."

Mom spoke in a small voice and it hurt my heart to think that she was upset.

Dr. Brown nodded again. "Jeff? What about you?"

"My relationship with Vinny has been strained lately," he admitted. "Something changed. We butt heads. We're both very stubborn."

"And with Logan?"

"Logan and I are good," he said with a sigh, making brief eye contact with me.

"I think we need to shift our understanding of how this family works," Dr. Brown began, speaking with her hands as she gestured to all of us. "This conversation is hyper focused on how Vinny has changed the family dynamic. What about how all of you have changed it?"

For the first time in a while it felt like I finally had someone on my side. Dr. Brown would hold me accountable for my shit, but she wasn't going to let

them pin all the blame on me. She would hold everyone accountable and that comforted me.

"Vinny, how about you start," Dr. Brown prompted. "What is something you've done that has contributed to this change?"

There were likely many things, none that I wanted to say.

"I shut them out," I came up with.

"Okay," Dr. Brown said before turning to Logan, "And you, Logan?"

He glanced up at the ceiling as if he was trying to pluck an answer out of thin air.

"I don't know..." he said. "I guess, I'm sorta not around a lot? And when I am, I have my friends or my girlfriend there, so I guess I sorta stopped being around and stopped making time for just family."

"Valerie?"

"I've been more... emotional," Mom started. "And I think that sometimes makes things worse."

"Jeff?"

Dad was silent for a moment. I knew there was a lot he could say too. Because the majority of the problems within this family weren't about Mom or Logan, they were about him and I.

"Like I said, Vinny and I butt heads," he began. "I think a large part of that is because I have become more protective and that has caused me to be hard on him."

At least he could admit that.

"This sort of self reflection is important in realizing how you affect situations so you can hold yourself accountable," Dr. Brown told us with a

light smile. "It's easy to realize the outside factors that change a situation or cause you to act a certain way, it's harder to realize the internal ones."

She continued, "Hyper-focusing on the external factors can lead to resentment among the family. It can lead to someone being isolated, the odd one out."

That one being me.

"Let's think about a time before this shift in your family," Dr. Brown said. "What was it like before these changes?"

"I'd like to think we used to spend more time together," Jeff easily answered. "We used to be so tight-knit, but the boys got older and weren't around as much, then things happened and made things different."

Again, I couldn't hold back a snort, causing all eyes to go to me. It was like he still wasn't getting it. Dr. Brown could talk about self reflection all she wanted and Dad still wouldn't have self awareness.

"Do you have something to add, Vinny?" Dr. Brown asked.

"I just think it's funny we're skirting around the subject," I replied, crossing my arms over my chest. I knew family therapy would be like this.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that he can't even say what 'things' happened," I told her, looking directly at my father. "I came out, that's what happened, and he has treated me differently ever since."

Dad's expression morphed into one of surprise and offense.

"Vinny, that's not true," Dad immediately responded.

"Yes, it is," I said through gritted teeth. "That may not be the only thing, but that's what started it. You haven't looked at me the same since then."

I felt the burning of unshed tears in my eyes and I was doing my best to keep them from falling. Me coming out was the start of the rift between us, his reaction to it at least. He looked at me differently and it made me wish he just wouldn't look at me at all.

Logan looked at me differently for a while too, but I credited that more to him walking in on me having sex with my best friend than to me being gay. Mom never looked at me with anything other than love in her eyes. It was just Dad that had changed.

"Vinny, you being gay does not change how I feel about you," Dad continued, his tone loud and serious as he leaned forward in his seat. And I believed that he thought that, that he had convinced himself that he didn't care about my sexuality, but he didn't see the change in his eyes when he looked at me.

"Sometimes we aren't aware of the changes that others see," Dr. Brown explained. "You may feel that Vinny being gay didn't change anything, but to him it did."

Logan shrunk back in his seat like he was trying to hide himself away from the conversation being had. He wouldn't back me up on this, so I was alone in arguing that Dad had a less than favorable reaction to me coming out.

"I don't know what I did to make him think that," Dad said to Dr. Brown. "I thought I have been supportive."

"So supportive you told Carson to dump me to save himself?" I spat and Dad's eyes widened while Mom let out a gasp. "And no, Carson didn't tell me, I *heard* you in the house. That day after Carson and I had a fight and he came by the house."

"Dad, you didn't..." Logan trailed, looking at our father in disbelief. It surprised me that Carson hadn't told Logan.

"I wanted to protect both of you," Dad said, giving me a pleading look.

"Jeff, oh my God!" Mom exclaimed, her face contorting into an angry expression. "How *dare* you!"

I wanted to forget what I heard Dad saying to Carson that day, and the fact that it sounded like it wasn't the first time they had that conversation. I heard Carson come in, wanted to talk to him, but Dad had gotten to him first and I heard everything. I couldn't even be mad at Carson for keeping it from me. He didn't want to cause more problems and I didn't blame him for it.

"I don't want either of you ending up hurt," Dad continued, only speaking to me. "It's not about you being with a boy, it's that I don't think you should be in a relationship right now."

"That's not your decision to make!" I shouted, the tears leaking out as my hands tightly gripped the arms of my chair.

Logan pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers and let out a heavy sigh.

"That's so fucked, Dad," he said. "Do you realize how fucked that is?"

"Is it so bad I wanted to make sure neither of them got hurt?" Dad asked and I let out a humorless laugh.

"You really don't get it," I said, shaking my head.

"Jeff, I think it's a normal reaction to want to keep your son out of a relationship to protect him," Dr. Brown started. "But that could also be detrimental for him, especially since Vinny doesn't have a solid support system right now."

Dad's face fell at that and Mom looked like she was about to cry, but Dr. Brown didn't say anything to console them or retract her statements. She would only say something if she completely meant it.

And she was right anyway. My support system was truly lacking and it did seem like at times that the only person who supported me unconditionally

was Carson. That was why it was so hard for me to stay angry at him. He was all I really had and that wasn't a good thing. I didn't want to rely on him, I couldn't, which was part of what I talked to Dr. Brown about earlier.

I needed my family to be a support system for me because forcing all of that onto one person, my high school boyfriend at that, was unhealthy and toxic. Even though I didn't want to see it that way, Dr. Brown made sure I knew it.

"I think we can end it here today if no one has anything to add," Dr. Brown said. We all stayed silent. "I know this was a lot and you all have very heightened emotions right now, but I think it's a good thing to get these thoughts and emotions out for you all to see."

My parents thanked her and we walked out of her office.

"I'll see you next week, Vinny," Dr. Brown called out. "Remember to call me if you need anything."

I had a feeling I might have to take her up on that one of these days.

"Hey, look, I didn't know Dad did that," Logan whispered to me as we walked through the waiting room. Mom was walking far ahead of Dad as he tried to catch up with her.

"I know," I replied.

"And I don't agree with that at all," he continued. "I think you and Carson are good together and—"

"That's great, Logan, but you could've back me up a little in there," I snapped, stopping outside the door.

He looked at me with a confused expression.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know Dad has treated me differently ever since I came out!" I exclaimed. "You couldn't agree with me in there? Show him that I wasn't

being fucking crazy so he would stop trying to fucking gaslight me into believing otherwise?"

"I didn't really notice, I'm sorry I—"

I let out a frustrated groan.

"You know, Dr. Brown is right about me not having a solid support system," I continued. "And you're part of the fucking problem, Logan!"

He looked at me with sympathy.

"Vinny, I really didn't know you felt that way."

I grew angrier as I felt myself tearing up. I couldn't stand the way I started to cry when I got frustrated.

"All I needed was someone in there to validate the things I said," I told him, my voice cracking. "But none of you did because you don't notice anything. I just needed someone to back me up other than Dr. Brown and I wish it was you."

Logan's eyes became glossy and I forced myself to look away from him. My tears would fall if I saw him looking like that.

"Can we go on a walk?" Logan asked. "Just the two of us?"

The only thing that made me say yes was that I didn't want to have to get in the car with our parents. Logan jogged over to the car, presumably to tell them what we were doing, before coming back to me. The two of us started down the sidewalk as our parents drove by us.

We were silent for a while. I had said all I needed to during my outburst, but Logan looked as if he had something on his mind. I wasn't going to coax it out of him. If he wanted to say something, he would say it on his own. For all I cared, we could be silent the whole way home.

"I think Dana's pregnant."

I nearly tripped at his words, stopping abruptly on the pavement.

"What?" I hissed.

Logan nodded, looking down at his shoes.

"I just have this feeling," he said, bringing his gaze up to my face. "She's been acting weird, feeling sick, having cravings. That's what all that means right? Or am I just jumping to conclusions?"

I had no idea how to answer that. Here I thought Logan wanted to talk about me and him, but instead he dropped this bomb on me and I had no idea what to do.

"I haven't told anyone," he said. "I haven't even talked to Dana about it. I don't wanna offend her or make her mad or something. I just need to know if I'm being crazy."

He needed validation, someone to back him up.

"I mean, I don't think it's a far fetched idea," I said after a few moments. "I think you should talk to her about it though."

"I know, I just—" He let out a frustrated groan, pulling at his hair. "Part of me doesn't wanna know. It feels like there's too much going on. And Dana's parents would be *pissed,* like, really pissed. Might kick her out kind of pissed."

"So she would live with us," I replied. "Look, you and Dana are gonna be fine."

"I'm just—" he paused. "I'm not ready to be a dad, *obviously* . But I also might just be stressing out over something I made up in my head."

I nodded because I didn't know what to say. The situation was weird to think about. If Dana did end up being pregnant, she may not even want to go through with it. And if she did go through with it, she still might not want to keep it. But if they did keep it, them being parents at seventeen would be strange to say the least.

"And look, Vin, I'm sorry for not backing you up in therapy," Logan said after a few more moments. "I will next time, promise."

"Okay."

"Dad does treat you differently," he said. "Differently than he treats me anyway. I should've said that."

"Okay," I repeated as we stopped at an intersection. "Can you tell Mom and Dad I'm going to Carson's?"

Logan raised his eyebrows. "Is that where you're really going?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, Logan, that's where I'm really going."

"If you're not, I'll tell them that you are," he said. "As long as you tell me where you'll be."

"I'm going to Carson's," I said before starting to cross the street. "I don't know if I'll be back tonight."

"Dad will love that," Logan sarcastically replied as he began walking the other way. "I'll tell them."

I waved to him and jogged across the street, making my way toward Carson's neighborhood. The sun was setting over the trees and the street lights starting coming on as I continued walking. I made it to Carson's house in a little over ten minutes, immediately noticing Paul's car in the driveway.

I had two options. I could turn around and go home, acting like I was never here in the first place. Or, I could suck it up and go inside despite the fact that Spencer might be in there.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I made my way up to the door and knocked. Cass opened it a few moments later, a wide smile breaking out on her face when she saw me.

"Vinny it's so good to see you!" she exclaimed, pulling me in for a hug.

"It's good to see you too, Cass," I said, returning the hug.

Carson came down the hall with a look of confusion that soon turned into a wide grin.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, pulling me to him. Cass smiled at us and disappeared down the hallway.

I buried my face in his chest. "Didn't wanna be with my family after therapy."

"That bad?"

"Could've been worse," I said, squeezing my arms tighter around his waist.

"I don't want to make anything worse for you, but Spencer's here."

I guessed as much. The thing with Spencer was that *I* was the problem. I continued pushing him away any time he tried to reconcile with me because it hurt to see him or speak to him, so he and Marina eventually stopped trying. Now Cass was dating Paul and Spencer was potentially dating Isaac, so it was going to get harder and harder to avoid him.

I didn't know what to do with that. It was possible it wasn't worth it trying to make things right with him because too much had changed. There was too much hurt and heartache between us for anything to be right with us again. But it could be worth it to challenge my emotions and at least be civil with him even if nothing went back to how it was before. I didn't think anything would ever go back to how it was before.

"It's fine," I told Carson after a beat of silence. I lifted my head and looked up at him. "I... I'm okay."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "We can go somewhere else."

"I'm sure."

And that was how I ended up sitting on the couch in the living room with Carson in between Spencer and me while Cass and Paul cooked dinner in

the kitchen.

We hadn't said a word to each other the whole time we watched TV until Carson shot me a sympathetic look as he stood up from the couch.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Carson said, then whispered to me, "Do you want to leave the room?"

"I'm fine, Carson," I said, feigning annoyance in my tone. I loved the way he watched out for me and how he seemed to know me so well.

I tried my best to look unbothered, but on the inside I was fighting to stay calm when Carson left the room, leaving Spencer and I alone.

"Vin..." Spencer started. I kept my gaze straight ahead, but I could see him looking at me out of the corner of my eye.

"Stop."

"Why does it have to be like this?" he asked. I ignored him. "I don't even know how we ended up like this! All from that one fight we had?"

My eyes snapped to his. "Just shut up, Spencer. You don't get it."

"Then help me get it!"

"What's this thing with Isaac, huh?" I shot back. I hated myself for even asking but it had been bothering me since I saw them the other night. "Because last time I checked, you didn't like him while I was hooking up with him but now all of a sudden you do? Are you just trying to get to me?"

"Vinny—"

"It isn't enough that your dad is dating my boyfriend's mother? But now you have to be with his friend too?" I questioned. "With someone I have been with?"

"Believe it or not Vinny, this is not all some ploy to get closer to you," Spencer replied, rolling his eyes.

I knew that, but the irrational part of me had me convinced otherwise. It had me convinced that Spencer was moving in on me and I wasn't ready for that.

"Everything okay?" Carson asked as he walked back into the room.

Spencer and I silently nodded as Carson sat down between us.

And I luckily didn't have to speak to my old friend for the rest of the night.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter.

Also, since I have been getting questions about this, I'm thinking there is going to be about 50 chapters total of this book, but that could change. I have it all outlined, but sometimes things change as I'm writing. Anyway, the goal is 50!

40

Carson Hughes

"So me and Crystal broke up," Archie randomly brought up at the lunch table on Monday.

It was just Archie, Hadley, Isaac, Darren, and me at the table. Dana and Logan had gone off campus for lunch and Vinny never usually liked to eat in the cafeteria. Darren had been staying around more often, and from what Hadley said, it was because he and Seth had gotten into an argument.

"You broke up with her?" Darren asked, a look of confusion on his face.

Archie shook his head. "She dumped me."

Even I was surprised at that. The two of them were always hanging out and it seemed like I rarely saw Archie anymore because he was always with her.

However, Isaac and Hadley didn't look shocked at all.

"I don't know what to say that's not going to make your feel worse," Isaac said before taking a sip of water. "Because I have some things to say."

Archie scoffed. "Shut the fuck up. I know you don't like her."

"That's not true."

"Arch, it's not that we didn't like her," Hadley started. "It was just obvious that she wasn't going to stay with you long term."

I wondered how they knew that. We had all always liked Crystal. She was one of our regular waitresses at a diner we frequented. Perhaps Hadley and Isaac spent more time with them than I had. Maybe I was more withdrawn from my friends than I thought.

I had been spending so much time with Vinny, I didn't realize I had been spending less time with my friends. We used to see each other every single day after school, but that had dwindled into maybe once a week or sometimes none at all. But no one complained. No one said they never saw me anymore. Maybe we were all just too occupied with our own relationships to notice.

"She's moving away for college in a few months," Archie said, pulling me from my thoughts. "She was doing classes at the community college, but she's finishing them up so she's moving. That's the reason she gave me anyway."

"I mean, yeah," Hadley said, her voice slightly harsh. "What college girl wants to be tied down to a high schooler? It's better this way. She would have just ended up cheating on you."

"Shut up, Hadley," Archie snapped. My eyes widened at his outburst. The carefree Archie never snapped.

"Hey, don't," Darren spoke up, lifting a hand up.

"Are you actually upset over her, Arch?" Hadley asked.

He scoffed again, then his face softened and he wore an easy smile.

"No," he said. "I'm just annoyed that it wasn't me who dumped her."

I rolled my eyes along with Hadley.

"Typical," Hadley remarked.

"Now me and Isaac are single and we can go out and be each other's wingmen," Archie said, his grin widening as he threw his arm around Isaac's shoulder and pulled him uncomfortably close.

"No thanks," Isaac said, trying to push away from Archie, but unable to loosen his grip.

I wondered if Isaac actually did consider himself single. He had said his relationship with Spencer was nothing, but I couldn't tell if that was true or if he was just trying to save face.

"Come on, you have the easy job," Archie said, releasing him. "I only like girls. I'd have to pick through the guys and girls to find someone for you."

"I don't want anyone *you'd* find for me."

I laughed at that. Part of me wanted to go find Vinny, but then I suddenly felt guilty. I had just been thinking about how I rarely spend any time with my friends and then immediately after, I thought about leaving them.

"Hey," I said, everyone's attention turning to me. "Do you guys want to ditch the rest of the day?"

"Who are you and what have you done with Carson?" Hadley asked, though she looked excited at the idea.

"Don't question it, Hads, let's go," Archie said, happily springing from his seat.

The five of us left the cafeteria and scurried out to the parking lot to get into my car. Isaac sat up front with me while Hadley sat between Archie and Darren in the back.

"Hey, Carson, stop by my house real quick," Archie called out from the back seat.

I looked at him briefly through the rearview mirror.

"Why?"

"So I can get my weed," he replied as if he was stating the obvious.

"Where the hell did you get weed?" Hadley asked, leaning against Darren as she spun her head toward Archie.

"Crystal's brother," he said. "Which reminds me I'm probably going to have to get it somewhere else now."

When I pulled up to Archie's house, he sprinted out of the back seat and was back out to the car in what seemed like a split second. He held the bag with the weed in his hand like he didn't care who saw.

"Arch, put it away," I said. "If I get pulled over and they see that, it's gonna be bad."

Archie rolled his eyes, stuffing the bag into his pocket. "Okay, Dad."

He directed me to a spot in the park that was toward the woods, hidden from the road and the more populous areas of the park. Archie had said this was where Crystal's brother did most of his dealings and they came here to smoke because no one was ever around.

"He gives it to you pre-rolled?" Hadley asked as Archie pulled the bag out of his pocket. We settled on some boulders a little ways from where I parked the car. I was already paranoid about being caught, looking over my shoulder every few seconds.

"No, I rolled them," Archie said, handing her a joint.

"That's why it looks like shit," she said before placing it in her mouth. Archie lit the end for her and she breathed in, taking a second hit before trying to hand it to Darren.

He shook his head with a light smile. "Can't. We get random drug tests in season."

"Lame!" Archie exclaimed, holding his hand out to Hadley. "Hand it over."

When Archie was done with the joint, he handed it over to Isaac who took a few hits then moved to pass it to me.

"Do you want it?" he asked. "You don't have to."

I hesitated for a moment.

"I can drive us back if you're worried about that," Darren offered, leaning back on his hands as Hadley pressed her back against him.

"No, no, I'm good," I said. "I don't want any."

Isaac shrugged, taking another hit before handing it back to Archie.

The three of them continued handing it back and forth between each other for a while. Isaac and Hadley continued acting normally. It was Archie who looked like he was already feeling the effects.

"Duuuude," he said, grinning as he lightly tapped Hadley on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "I think that's Crystal's brother over there."

At first, I thought he was just hallucinating. That was until I followed his line of sight and saw a car on the path opposite of where we came from. I squinted, trying to get a better look at the two people in the car and once I saw who they were, it was like my whole body froze.

Thomas sat in the driver's seat, looking exactly as I had remembered him from summer camp. His skin was still sun kissed like we had never left those long days out under the sun, his hair still sandy on the top. And his eyes were still as piercing as ever. It was his eyes that really drew me in at the start.

I wasn't prepared for who I saw sitting next to him in the passenger's seat.

Vinny.

His dark hair looked like it had been pushed back by his hand countless times. He looked content and comfortable in the car like he had been in it before.

Thomas laughed at something he said and I looked away, not knowing what to think.

Isaac was already staring at me when I turned back to the group. He held a look of concern on his face and I wondered if he knew Vinny and Thomas knew each other before I did.

Archie and Hadley had already forgotten about the car with Thomas and Vinny. The two of them were lying back on the rocks, laughing as they pointed out shapes in the clouds. Darren stared at the car with an unreadable expression.

My mind was set on two explanations: Vinny was getting drugs from Thomas or he was cheating on me with him. Or both.

"Are you okay?" Isaac asked me quietly, bumping
my knee with his.

"Did you know that Vinny knew Thomas?" I asked, glancing at Isaac's confused face.

"I don't know Thomas," Isaac denied. "I didn't even know that was his name until right now. I'm assuming he's Crystal's brother."

That made me feel slightly better.

"I know him from summer camp," I admitted. "He and I were... together? No, not together but like—"

"Hooking up?"

I nodded.

"Like I said," Isaac started. "I don't know him."

I let out a long sigh before he continued.

"But whatever you're thinking is going on with Vinny and Thomas, it's probably not as bad as that."

One could hope.

***

Vinny Taylor

After rushing back to school during lunch and sitting through the rest of my classes, I was ready to get the hell out of there. I went by Carson's locker with the hope of seeing him, but he wasn't there.

Who I did see in the hallway was someone I never wished to see again. Seth leaned against his locker, a girl twirling her hair in front of him, but he wasn't looking at her. He was glaring at me like he wished he could hurt me with just his eyes. I rushed away.

I drove home and dropped my things off and changed before grabbing Luna and taking her for a run like I usually did after school. She had so much energy and she loved running by my side. It was nice to have a companion while running, so I wasn't in solitude.

Dr. Brown had told me the same thing. She thought it was good for me to bring Luna because she provided me with comfort and companionship which was good for my mental health or whatever. I just liked to bring her because she loved it so much and I didn't feel so alone when I was with her.

When we got back, I made sure Luna's water bowl was full before going to the kitchen to get water for myself. Dana and Logan sat at the kitchen island when I entered.

"So, how did it go?" I asked them, pulling a water out of the fridge before hopping up to sit on the counter.

"You know mom hates when you sit up there," Logan retorted and I just rolled my eyes at him. He just wanted to dodge the question.

"It was fine," Dana replied. "We're not going to know anything for a couple days."

"Did you take regular pregnancy tests?" I asked.

"Of course she did," Logan snapped. He had been edge about this whole thing.

"Some came back positive, some were negative, others were inconclusive," Dana explained. "So we just really don't know."

It felt strange to me that we were the only three people who knew about this, that Dana and Logan trusted me of all people with this. Well, besides whatever doctor Dana went to.

"It'll be fine," I said. "Whatever happens, whatever you decide, it's gonna be fine."

I could barely believe the words that came out of my mouth. I was never one for encouragement, but I couldn't bear to see Dana looking so upset and anxious. I would pretty much say anything to keep her from looking like that.

"And you," I said, turning to Logan with a stern expression. "Need to chill the fuck out. Dana's going through a lot right now and you need to be there for her instead of acting like a dumbass."

Logan looked as if he was going to start arguing with me, but stopped when we heard a sniffle coming from Dana. She sat with her face in her hands, letting out quiet cries. Logan was at her side in an instant, wrapping his arms around her.

"Babe, I'm sorry if I made you upset," he said, rubbing slow circles on her back. "I'm sorry, I know this effects you way differently than it effects me. I'm so sorry."

"It's not that, Logan," she said, picking her face up. "I don't know why I'm so emotional! I'm not like this, you know I'm not, so it has to mean that *something* is going on with me."

"Maybe it's just the stress."

I felt like I was intruding on a moment, so I slid off the counter and left the kitchen before pulling out my phone to text Carson.

To: Carson

come over

From: Carson

on my way

I smiled down at the text and went up to my bedroom to wait for him. I was having a quick smoke at the window when he walked in.

"Hey," I said with a grin, stubbing the cigarette out in the ash tray.

He looked strangely at the cigarette but didn't comment on it. I knew he wanted to ask me why I haven't quit yet and I appreciated that he didn't.

Quitting was harder than I anticipated, but I swore to myself this would be the last pack I bought. Once I finished it, it was over.

"Hey," he replied, sitting down on my bed.

"I didn't see you after school," I said, sitting down in his lap. He rested his hands on my thighs, looking down at them.

"I skipped with my friends," he told me.

I shot him a strange look, my face pinched in confusion.

"You did?"

He looked up at me, his expression blank.

"I saw you," he said.

"Saw me?" He nodded. "Where?"

"In the woods behind the park," he said and my eyes widened. "With Thomas."

"What the hell were you doing back there?"

"What the hell were you doing with him?" he asked, his tone clipped, but he didn't make any move that signaled he wanted me off of him.

"That's none of your business."

I knew it was a mistake as soon as I said it, and I felt awful for it. I got too defensive like I always did. It wasn't that I didn't trust Carson as much as it was I didn't want him knowing certain things about me because I feared that would make him not like me anymore and I had already fallen for him harder than I realized.

His face broke a bit, showing me how he felt. Disappointed, sad, confused.

"Just tell me if you were *with* him," Carson said, his voice strained and quiet.

"God, Carson, *no* ," I instantly denied.

"Then what were you doing?"

"I buy my cigarettes from him, okay?" I said, louder than I intended. "And sometimes weed, but that's it."

Carson waited for a moment, processing my words.

"Can you blame me for thinking otherwise?" he asked, looking slightly embarrassed.

"A little," I replied with a small laugh. "You think someone as anti-social as me would go cheat on you?"

"Well, you don't tell me a lot."

That stung more than I wanted to admit, but I didn't show my hurt.

"How do you know him anyway?" I asked.

Carson's face tinged pink. "Summer camp."

It took me a second to realize why he looked so embarrassed. Thomas was *gay* , I already knew that.

" *Oh*, " I said. "Oh, you were *with* him."

Carson nodded with a sheepish smile.

"Well, I'm not gonna go to him again anyway," I told him. "I'm officially quitting."

Carson chuckled, finally looking like himself.

"Is that all it took?" he asked. "Finding oht that I've been with your supplier?"

"Yeah, that really makes me not want to go see him ever again."

Carson laughed again, catching my lips with his briefly.

"I'm the jealous type, you know," I teased.

"Oh, I know," he said. "I saw how you were with Emelia."

"Shut up."

And I kissed him again.

"You were going to fight her for me," Carson teased against my lips.

"Enough," I said, pushing him down on the bed so that he was on his back while I hovered over him.

"Am I embarrassing you?"

Carson looked simultaneously adorable and sexy as he lay underneath me. His smile was teasing like he enjoyed riling me up. He wanted to see just how riled he could get me.

So I kissed him again. Then kissed him lower and lower until he wasn't the one teasing me anymore.

When we were finished, I couldn't help but think back to what Carson had said to me before.

"Well, you don't tell me a lot."

He was right of course. How much more of that could he take? How much more of it could I take? There would be a time when Carson had enough. When he realized I was not worth the trouble. And all I could do was hope we were not falling into that place.

**

Thank you for reading!

Let me know what you thought about the chapter!

41

Vinny Taylor

"How do you think family therapy went?"

I sat at Dr. Brown's desk while she sat on the other side of it. Whenever I walked into her office, she told me I could sit anywhere, and so I chose her desk just to see how far she would let me go. She took it in stride and sat across from me without a word. Dr. Brown decided to go right in with my thoughts on family therapy, which was something I would rather forget.

"It was fine," I answered in a half truth. It wasn't nearly as bad as it could've been, but it definitely wasn't all rainbows and sunshine.

"I think it was productive, no matter how uncomfortable it might have been for you," she replied. "Did you and your family talk about it afterwards?"

"Barely."

Dad tried because he could never leave well enough alone. He wanted to talk about it even though I told him I would rather die than continue that conversation. He didn't get that I needed a break. A break from therapy, from the heart to hearts, from *him* .

Not to mention, I had just found out Logan thought Dana was pregnant, so my mind had been elsewhere and I was in no mood to keep talking with my father about how he changed his perception of me.

"What do you mean by that?" Dr. Brown asked. "Did you initiate conversation?"

"Hell no," I said. "Dad did."

"And you didn't think it would be a good idea to talk things out?"

"I think I deserve a break from therapy," I told her and Dr. Brown nodded thoughtfully.

"You do," she agreed. "And if talking things out with your father doesn't seem like a good thing for you to do at home, then maybe it was the right decision not to."

I nodded and let out a huff, resting my elbows down on Dr. Brown's desk and putting my head in my hands.

"Would you say it's hard to live with your father?"

"No," I instantly replied.

We may have had a rough relationship for the last few months, but I still loved my father. There were times when we had an understanding with each other. The problems arose when he crossed boundaries he knew better than to cross.

"It's better than the alternative," I added.

"And what's the alternative?"

That was something I didn't want to get into. Ever since Grandma had found out about my therapy, which I had found out she actually overheard Dad talking about it with Mom instead of Dad telling her about it, she has made it a point to bring up me moving in with Robbie every chance she could sneak it into conversation.

She would talk about Robbie and his kids and how *wonderful* they were and how I would benefit from being with my real father because he apparently cleaned up his act. Dad would get pissed off every time she said it and she would tell him that he needs to go to therapy for his anger. Little did she know that he *did* in fact go to therapy, though it was with the rest of us.

She wanted me with Robbie because she felt bad for him or because she was angry with Dad for resenting her and him. Either way it didn't actually matter. Her opinions had no sway on my father and she was just a giant

thorn in his side that he was forced to interact with no matter how much it hurt him.

"My grandmother wants me to move in with my biological father," I told her. "It's not really an alternative since my parents would never let it happen, but in the back of my mind there's always the thought that one day, I'll have to face him."

"One day, you might have to," Dr. Brown agreed. "But it doesn't have to be now. It doesn't have to be anytime soon. You need to focus on yourself and your relationship with your family before reopening old wounds."

I nodded in agreement, flipping my thumb through blank sticky notes on her desk,

"Does what happened with your biological father still bother you?" she asked.

I had never told her what happened. She just knew that I was taken in by my Mom and Dad when I was three. It had affected Dad more than it did me, and that was the reason he was never able to forgive his brother. Not that I cared, really. I could go the rest of my life never seeing Robbie again and I wouldn't care.

"It bothers Dad a lot still," I replied. "I know what happened, but I don't really remember it and we don't talk about it."

"That probably has something to do with why Jeff is so protective over you," Dr. Brown said. "It's a natural response because he associates that traumatic experience with you and how he couldn't protect you from it."

It wasn't *that* traumatic, but it was for him apparently.

"And your relationship with your father suffers because of this," she added. "And maybe him looking at you differently ever since you came out isn't because you're gay but because it's another thing he feels he has to protect you from. From the way gay people are treated in society, from bullies at your school, from boys you may choose to date."

I didn't want what Dr. Brown was saying to make sense, but it did. It was easier to just blame Dad for the way his perception of me changed, but Dr. Brown forced me to confront the possible reasonings behind it and made me see it probably wasn't something he noticed or was doing consciously. She made me realize that some of my problems were simply because I made them up in my head and refused to look at them from other angles.

"Why do you always have to do that?" I asked her with a groan.

She smiled. "Do what?"

"Make so much sense."

"Because it's my job," she said. "And I wouldn't be effectively doing my job if the things I said to you *didn't* make sense."

"I think that about ends our session," Dr. Brown continued, standing up from her seat. "Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

I stood up. "No, I'm good."

"I'll walk you out," she said and the tow of us started to exit her office. "Any plans for tonight?"

"I'm supposed to go on a date with my boyfriend," I said, looking down at my feet.

"The boyfriend Jeff told to break up with you?"

"The very same one."

"Well, I'm glad he didn't."

"You and me both."

There was no way I should have been nervous going out with Carson, but this was our first *real* date and I didn't know what to expect.

Dad, of course, was waiting for me in the waiting room of the office, flipping through a random magazine he picked up from the table beside him. I said goodbye to Dr. Brown before walking over to him. He looked at me over his magazine before setting it down and standing up.

"Did you hear Kim and Kanye are getting divorced?" he asked me, gesturing toward the magazine.

I rolled my eyes. "Who gives a shit?"

Dad shrugged and the two of us started out toward the car.

"I just thought they'd last," he replied. "But I guess it makes sense that two obscenely wealthy and arrogant people couldn't stay together."

We settled into the car and Dad waited until we were already on our way home until he started speaking again.

"So you're going out with Carson tonight?" he asked, glancing at me briefly before turning his attention back to the road.

I glared at him from the corner of my eyes.

"Yes."

"Anywhere special?"

"Why are we talking about this?" I snapped.

Dad let out a heavy sigh. "Look, I feel really guilty about what I said to Carson about breaking up with you."

"That's not an apology."

" *I'm sorry* ," he said in a pleading tone. "I know it doesn't excuse it, but I never meant for you to hear that."

"We can talk about this in therapy."

"So you won't even talk to me now?" he asked. "All our conversations are limited to therapy?"

I shook my head. "We were just talking about Kim and Kanye."

"That's not what I mean," he said. "We can't talk about anything important?"

"You're the one that wanted to go to therapy," I reminded him, raising my eyebrows. "I don't need to be in therapy for an hour and then hash it out with you just because you're feeling guilty. Do you think about how draining this is for me at all? Or do you just think about yourself?"

He was silent for a moment before nodding.

"You're right," he said. "I didn't think about how it is for you and that was selfish of me. I'm sorry."

"Glad we cleared that up."

"I really am sorry, Vinny," he said as we pulled up to the house. "I know I've been a rotten father to you, but I'm going to be better. I promise."

"I don't think you're rotten," I muttered.

I didn't even know why I said it, but deep down I felt as though I couldn't leave him thinking that I thought he was rotten or failing. And the grin he sent me made me feel a little better.

***

Carson picked me up for our date at seven, much to the dismay of his friends who were hoping we'd be going to the football game with them.

There was no time for me to get either Dana or Logan alone to see if they had heard any news of Dana's test results. But the two were acting normal. Maybe too normal. That could mean anything.

"You're skipping the football game for me?" I asked Carson as the two of us walked to his car.

He chuckled. "You know I don't like going to those anyway, but yes, I'd skip anything for you."

I scoffed but couldn't suppress my grin. "So sappy."

Carson reached out for my hand and I grasped his, resting them on the center console.

"Where are we going?" I asked him, widening my eyes as I realized I hadn't even helped him plan this date.

"I figured we could go to the park and have some dinner in front of the pond," he replied.

"You brought dinner?"

"It's nothing special," he said sheepishly. "Just some sandwiches, some fruit, some dessert..."

"Oh my God, I'm the worst," I said with a groan.

"Vin, stop."

"I didn't even help you with anything!" I exclaimed, shaking my head. "I honestly thought we were just going out to eat or something."

"You didn't need to help with anything," he assured me, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. "I wanted to do something nice for you."

That didn't make me feel any less like a shitty boyfriend. Things had been weird with us every since Carson found my burns and got me sent to therapy and this date felt like a huge step back into normalcy. I wished I had more to do with it.

Carson still felt guilty about the whole thing and I still felt guarded even though therapy had seemed to be going well. I wanted this date to just erase that, to make us move on from that bump instead of having that invisible, unspoken barrier between us. Part of me knew that was just wishful thinking.

The two of us eventually got to the park and Carson got a literal picnic basket out of the trunk of the car. That did nothing to help me feel less shitty, but the look of pure joy and excitement on his face did. Carson held the basket with one hand while offering me his other.

There was no one in the park at this time of night. We had the whole thing to ourselves, just how I preferred it.

"Where do you want to go sit?" he asked. "I was thinking near the pond."

I glanced over at him and saw the way the sunlight made his face glow as it got lower in the sky. There wasn't a moment I looked at him that I didn't notice his beauty or how he could be doing so much better than me. Yet he seemed content, happy even, with my hand in his.

"As long as no fucking geese come near us," I said, shuddering even thinking about those disgusting things.

Carson chuckled, squeezing my hand. "I can't really control that, but I'll fight them off for you."

"Those things can be vicious, you know," I told him as we got closer to the pond. "I was attacked by one as a kid."

Carson couldn't stop the belt of laughter from escaping his mouth. He looked down at me with his wide grin, waiting for the story.

"It was here," I started with a grin of my own. "Dad used to take me and Logan because he had a day off during the week. I was sticking my hands in the water even though Dad always used to tell me not to and a goose came up to me. I tried to pet it and it bit my hand then started chasing me."

Carson let out another loud laugh. "Oh my God."

"I ran toward Dad, hysterically crying, and he picked me up, I was like four by the way," I continued. "Then he told me that's why I should always listen to him, but he held me for the rest of the time while I cried and Logan played on the playground."

"That's so funny," Carson replied. "Hopefully we don't see any. I'd hate for you to get bitten."

I rolled my eyes as he released my hand to set down a blanket.

"They do bite," I said, trying to convince him.

Carson pulled me down next to him on the blanket. I practically landed on top of him and he pecked me on the cheek.

"I know they do," he said, opening up the picnic basket and handing me a sandwich. "I tried to put stuff you'll actually eat on it."

He knew I sometimes struggled with sticking with my diet. It had been hard for me to go from eating practically nothing to eating consistently. I tried to hide my struggles as best I could, but I knew Carson noticed when I wouldn't finish my lunch or when I had food sitting in front of me that I never touched. He never commented on it, knowing it would only cause a rift.

"I would eat anything you made," I said, my tone slightly clipped as I unwrapped the sandwich. He didn't say anything in response to that. "How's your mom doing?"

I hadn't seen her since I went to their house unannounced and sat on the couch all night with Spencer while Carson was between us.

"She's good," he said, clearing his throat. "She wants you to come over more often. She loves you. I think she still feels bad about the whole inviting Paul and Spencer to dinner thing."

I groaned at his words. The last thing I wanted was for Carson's mom to feel guilty because I couldn't keep my shit together.

"She doesn't need to feel bad for that, it's forgotten," I told him. "I'll go over this week and see her."

Carson glanced at me with a look of adoration, a look I loved on him but not one I thought I deserved.

He pulled a few tupperware containers out of the picnic basket and placed them down on the blanket before opening one up with fresh strawberries. Carson held the container out to offer me some and I took a few in my hand, popping them into my mouth.

"You know, you're kinda good at this whole boyfriend thing," I teased, leaning back on my hands. "Are you sure you've never done this before?"

Carson playfully shook his head at me. "I have once, but it was barely a relationship."

"Oh yeah, you dated Clare Montgomery," I said, suddenly remembering how jealous I was at fifteen when Carson started bringing around a girlfriend.

"You remember that?"

"Of course, I do," I replied. "I wanted to strangle her for getting to date you."

Carson let out a short laugh. "Seriously?"

I nodded. "I told you I had a thing for you. I tried to make up reasons for why I hated her, but it was really just because she was dating you."

He shot me an endearing look before leaning in to kiss me. The kiss was longer than I expected and my lips chased his when he pulled away.

"Clare was kinda a bitch, so I think you were justified," Carson joked. "She couldn't stand Hadley because she thought she had a thing for me."

"She didn't deserve you," I told him. *Neither did I* .

Carson shrugged, opening up his sandwich. "I was just happy a girl liked me enough to date me. I was still denying my sexuality at that point. I knew, but I thought if I at least tried to like Clare, I could change it somehow."

"I wish I knew about you sooner," I said. "Then I wouldn't have wasted so much time on a bunch of guys that didn't matter." I wouldn't be the way that I was. My life would be different for the better.

"That would have been something, huh?" he agreed. "If I just accepted it sooner, we could have been together all that time."

"You think we would have been?" I asked, my voice soft as if I was afraid of the answer. Carson's eyes glowed as he looked at me, his hand smoothing over the blanket and finding mine like it was second nature.

"Of course I do," he said. "If we were both out, or we both knew about each other, I... yes."

I felt like I was melting under his gaze. The way he looked at me, and the way that made me feel like I was the most important person in the world, was too much. I was overwhelmed with feelings I had never felt in my life.

"Carson, I... I—" I stumbled on my words. "I really fucking adore you."

The grin on his face seemed like it was enough to cause world peace. I didn't believe anyone could look at his smile and not instantly want to be a better person, to do anything to get him to look at them like that.

"I really fucking adore you too," he said, leaning closer to me.

"Did you just say fuck?"

"I may be picking up some of your habits I'm afraid."

That caused me to burst out in a fit of laughter just before he caught my mouth with his again. The kiss got more heated quicker than I could comprehend. Before I even realized it, I was lying back on the blanket and Carson was hovering over me, kissing my mouth and down to my neck. His hands were finding their way down to my waist.

I tried to reposition us so I could be on top, this position weighing on my chest, making me feel trapped, but I couldn't move us. Carson was to lost in the kiss to notice my struggle and that caused me to panic.

I writhed underneath him and placed my hands on his shoulders. Carson immediately pulled away, sensing my discomfort. I pushed on his shoulders, causing him to topple over beside me.

"Are you okay?" he asked, a look of concern adorning his face. "What's wrong? What did I do?"

My breathing was heavy and Carson looked as if he was two seconds away from panicking with me. I held my hand out, silently telling him to stay away from me.

"Vinny, please talk to me," Carson pleaded. "What's happening? What can I do to help?"

"Nothing, nothing," I breathed out, trying to steady myself.

Carson slowly moved closer. "Vinny, please. I'm scared right now. What do you need?"

This was too much. I was panicking and overwhelmed and embarrassed that Carson was seeing me like this. I hated myself for not even being able to let my boyfriend kiss me without losing my mind over it. I felt broken and damaged.

"Stop... looking at me," I said slowly.

"What?"

"Stop fucking looking at me!" I snapped, turning away from him and trying to focus on anything other than the moment.

Carson was silent until my breathing slowed and I finally turned to look at him again. He was sitting with his legs crossed, looking down at the blanket. I instantly felt like shit.

"Carson, I'm—" I started.

"What was that?" he asked, briefly glancing over at me before looking away again. "What did I do to make you react like that?"

"It was nothing, okay?" I replied. "It won't happen again."

"It wasn't nothing, Vinny," he denied, shaking his head. "You fully panicked. How can you say that's nothing?"

"I'm working on it, you don't need to worry."

"I don't need to worry?" He looked at me longer this time. "Something I did made you react like that and you're telling me not to worry? I can't do better or understand where you're coming from if you don't tell me anything."

I sighed. "Carson, I... I can't."

His expression broke slightly and I had to look away. It was a lot harder to work on myself in silence when I accidentally showed my vulnerabilities to Carson. He saw me panic, there was no hiding that. But I still couldn't bring myself to explain anything. It felt like putting it out in the open would bring everything back that I tried so hard to suppress. Confiding in Carson about past traumas wasn't an option at the moment. Not when I was still trying to keep it together and move past it on my own and not when I couldn't be sure that if I did confide in him that it would stay between us.

I must have had a look on my face that bared my thoughts to him.

"You still don't trust me, do you?" he asked after a few moments of silence, a look of disbelief on his face. When I didn't answer, he took that as confirmation. "I guess it was stupid of me to just assume you forgave me for that, that you understood why I had to tell Jeff."

"I *do* understand," I tried to convince him. "But this is different."

"I can't possibly know that if you don't let me in."

I knew he was right, but I said nothing.

"Let's just get going okay?" Carson suggested, starting to pick up everything and put it back in the basket. "I'll take you home."

I knew it was only a matter of time before Carson started seeing more of me and realizing he couldn't take it. He would have enough eventually and I was only making it worse by prolonging the inevitable.

Without another word, we walked to the car and drove home in silence.

**

Thank you for reading and thank you for being patient with me while I took a break/went on vacation. I really needed it!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! Vinny's therapy session? His conversation with Jeff? The date gone wrong?

42

TRIGGER WARNING: THERAPY SESSION: mentions drugs/drug use, alcoholism, child neglect, sexual assault/rape

Carson Hughes

Isaac could always tell when I was in a mood and he never kept it to himself when he noticed. That was why when we sat on the football field one evening while our friends, minus Logan, tossed around a ball, he shot me a strange look and immediately started questioning me.

"Why have you been so weird the last few days?" Isaac asked as we stretched our legs out on the turf field. "Relationship problems?"

"How'd you know?" I asked in a bland tone.

"Because that's the only thing that makes you act this way," he said with a knowing glance. "You're not a very happy guy when you're fighting with Vinny."

"We're not fighting," I said. "We had an argument. There's a difference." My tone was clipped because I was feeling defensive. I didn't want Isaac thinking Vinny and I had all these problems. We did have problems, but I didn't want to air them out for everyone else to see.

"Well, in that case, I had an 'argument' with Spencer the other day and now he's not talking to me," Isaac replied. "Not that it matters that much because we aren't actually dating, but I'm still in a bad mood."

I sent him a strange look, glancing over to make sure the rest of our friends weren't in hearing range. Logan and Dana were already aware of what was going on between Isaac and Spencer, but Hadley, Archie, and Darren were in the dark.

What could the two of them possibly have to argue about if they weren't even exclusive?

"What did you do?" I asked him and he narrowed his eyes at me.

"What did *I* do?"

I nodded, raising my eyebrows to wait for an answer.

Isaac rolled his eyes at me and looked away toward our friends on the field.

"It's hard to have casual sex with just one person without one of you catching feelings," Isaac vaguely responded.

It didn't seem all that hard to me. I had done the same with Thomas and neither of us had ended up wanting to be with the other long term. Isaac just seemed like he was in denial.

"So you're catching feelings?" I asked. "Or Spencer is?"

He glanced back to me. "He is and I can tell, so I brought it up and now he's mad at me."

"Seems like he's not the only one with feelings."

Isaac was moping more than usual. It couldn't just be because he wasn't getting laid. He didn't like the thought of Spencer being angry with him. It was similar to the way I felt when Vinny was angry with me. Or when I knew he didn't trust me enough to tell me important things about his life. Or when I couldn't tell if I was angry with him for that or just disheartened.

Isaac glared at me. "Enough about me and Spencer. What's going on with Vinny?"

I sighed. "I don't even know. He doesn't trust me still, ever since he started going to therapy. I thought he did, but I guess not."

"Cant really blame him for that," Isaac replied and I couldn't tell if he was telling me exactly what I didn't want to hear because he was being a good

friend or if it was because I had pushed his buttons about Spencer.

"He doesn't want me to know anything about him," I continued. I couldn't get into the details of what happened with Vinny. No matter how angry or annoyed I felt, I knew a personal, vulnerable moment when I saw one. "Was he always like that?"

I shouldn't have even asked. The thought of Isaac and Vinny together was one of the few things that made me truly uncomfortable. One of the reasons I could stay so close to Isaac after finding out was that we didn't talk about it and I did my best not to think about it.

Isaac's eyes widened slightly. "Me and him never talked really, so I don't know. I didn't know much about him anyway and he never offered anything up."

I grimaced, thinking of the two of them and all the *not talking* they did.

"I shouldn't have asked," I muttered, looking away from him.

"You're in a real relationship with him," he continued. "It's different. Maybe he should be telling you things, opening up to you."

Luckily, I was saved from having to continue this conversation by the others making their way back over to us. Darren had thrown his arm around Hadley while holding the football in his other hand. Hadley stared adoringly up at him and for the first time I saw how good they were together.

Logan and Dana had always been good together and their relationship just seemed to be a given. With Darren and Hadley, it was different. They didn't seem like they worked at first. It was like they were together just for the fun of it instead of actually caring for each other, but now I saw that wasn't the case and my own insecurities about my relationship came creeping in.

I began wondering how my friends saw my relationship with Vinny, if they thought we fit or if they thought it was only a matter of time before we broke up. I wondered if they looked at us like we made sense or if the two

of us together confused them. It was like how all of us looked at Archie and Crystal. They didn't make sense, and now they were done.

I couldn't help but wonder if Vinny and me didn't make sense to people, if we even made sense to each other. I wanted nothing more to be happy with him, but it seemed like every time I got comfortable something else came up to take that away.

"Darren says I'd be a better quarterback than Seth," Hadley announced, throwing herself down next to me.

Even just the sound of Seth's name made my blood boil.

"Maybe you could be back up," Isaac suggested as the others came to stand before us.

"No, I want to be the star."

"She has what it takes," Darren said with a grin, sitting down beside his girlfriend. "We might need you tomorrow."

The annual Thanksgiving game was taking place at our school tomorrow. Nearly everyone would be there. I didn't know if I could stomach it, not with how I was feeling lately.

"Not too confident in Seth's abilities?" Dana asked with a chuckle.

"He has a lot on his mind," Darren replied with a shrug. "Might choke. Who knows."

I was shocked to hear him speaking about his friend in this way. There must have been a rift between the two if Darren was being so brazen when speaking about him. It was probably for the better. Darren was too good of a guy to hang around with him. Maybe he was actually starting to figure that out.

"I'm *starving* , are we going for lunch now?" Archie cut in, looking impatient.

That was enough for all of us to heave ourselves off the ground and toward the parking lot. As we made our way to the cars, I tried to keep my eyes away from Hadley and Darren in each other's arms to stop the pang of jealousy I felt at their happiness.

***

Vinny Taylor

We had to move family therapy up to Wednesday because the office would be closed tomorrow and Friday for Thanksgiving. Dad insisted that we couldn't skip a session, so it was just another day of me being forced to sit through a solo therapy session immediately followed by a family session. Though, I would admit Dr. Brown went easy on me the days I had both.

"I want to thank you all for being flexible with your schedule this week," Dr. Brown started from beside me. We sat in a circle like we usually did for these sessions. I couldn't tell if this set up was comfortable or if it unnerved me having to see everyone.

"Thank you for making time for us," Dad said with an appreciative nod.

He and Mom still weren't fully back to normal after the last session when she found out he had told Carson to dump me. I had gotten over it, but she took it as a personal offense. He was doing his best to appease her though, I would give him that. Dad was doing all of the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and any other house work that needed to be done. He must have brought her home twelve bouquets of flowers. And it was working. She was softening toward him once again. I couldn't help but feel a little bitter that he never worked that hard for my forgiveness.

I could already tell that this session was going to turn very sour very quickly. I was still on edge from what had happened with Carson the other day and it had put me in a bad mood. My embarrassment and anger at myself would make it impossible for me to keep from snapping or being overly emotional. Dr. Brown and I barely talked about anything in our solo session and I nearly cried. So no, this wasn't going to be good.

"I want to start with an open discussion about how we all thought the last session went," Dr. Brown continued, looking at each of us. "What we learned from it and what we hope to gain from this one."

Dad cleared his throat, straightening in his seat just before he began speaking.

"I think last session opened my eyes to a few things," he started. "Things about myself, about my family."

Dr. Brown nodded. "That's really good. What sort of things?"

He hesitated. "Well, for starters, I realized how the way I act affects Vinny and my relationship with him. I never thought I treated him any differently, but hearing him say it, and reflecting on it, made me realize I have been negatively affecting my son. I was in denial about it before, thinking it was just him that had changed, but I had too."

This was already making me more emotional than it should have been. Ever since I freaked out with Carson the other day, my emotions had been all over place. I could feel myself choking up and we have been in here together barely five minutes. I didn't think I'd be able to make it the whole session.

"I'm glad you did some self reflection," Dr. Brown replied. "That's really important in any therapeutic process."

I tried to keep my eyes down, looking down at my shoes. Logan was bouncing his leg again and I didn't even have it in me to tell him to fucking knock it off, no matter how much it annoyed me.

"I, uh, I also did some self reflection," Logan spoke up, much to my surprise. I lifted my eyes to look at him. He was looking directly at Dr. Brown. "Vinny made me realize this actually, I realized I wasn't really aware of what was going on with our family. I didn't notice the way he was being treated or the way he felt and I couldn't be there for him because of that. I was being too self-absorbed."

Logan finally looked at me with sorrow in his eyes like he was a second away from a long winded apology.

"And I'm sorry," he continued. "Because I really haven't been paying attention. I've spent this whole time thinking my problems were the only problems that mattered."

I had to look away from him. I made the mistake of looking at my mother who was already looking at me with wide, glossy eyes. I couldn't avert my gaze from hers.

"Great, Logan," Dr. Brown kindly responded, I turned to face her. "What are your plans to be more present in the household?"

"Well, Vinny and I had a chance to talk just the two of us after last session," he told her. "And I think that's a good place to start, actually *talking* to each other and listening. Being upfront about our problems and how we feel."

I immediately felt a twinge of guilt, knowing I hadn't been upfront with my family about anything and knowing I had left them all in the dark for months now.

"That is a good place to start," Dr. Brown agreed. "What about you Jeff? What are your plans moving forward?"

Dad was silent for a moment. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "I've been thinking about the root of my problem, of being overly protective of Vinny, and I think it comes down to me trying to make up for not being able to protect him as a child. With Logan, he had an easy childhood, but Vinny with Robbie... I should have taken him out of there sooner. And I can't change that, but I subconsciously try to make up for it."

There was a burning in my throat. I wouldn't be able to speak without a sob breaking out.

"It's good that you can recognize that," Dr. Brown said. "Identifying the cause of the behavior is crucial in working to change it. It's also important to not blame ourselves for things we can't control. I know it's not easy

taking a child from their parent. It's not easy legally or emotionally. You did what you could then."

"It's just—" Dad let out a heavy breath, his voice starting to shake. "Vinny was this *adorable* kid, right? Like the kind you just want to hold and shelter forever. He was so *innocent* ."

Dad paused, but no one else jumped in, so he continued.

"He had these big eyes that would make you want to give him whatever he wanted," he said. "And even when he was with Robbie, before I knew anything was wrong, I just knew I didn't want to let anything ever happen to him. After Vinny's mother left, Robbie was a wreck, and then she accidentally overdosed and died, and he completely lost it."

This was the first time I had been hearing about this. I knew my biological mother was dead, but Dad had never talked about it. I never knew the woman. From what I understood, she had severe post-partum depression after I was born and was in and out of my life for the first two years of it anyway.

"He got into drugs. Vinny was just barely two," Dad continued. "And he was such a lonely child. Robbie was there, but he wasn't really *there* . I checked up on them all the time because I was worried about Robbie, but I was more worried about Vinny and what would happen if Robbie really lost it and was completely unable to care for him."

Dad took a deep breath in, wringing his hands in front of him.

"And our mother didn't want to intervene," he said, shaking his head. "She's in denial about a lot of things, even now, but especially about Robbie. Every time I went to check on them, I could tell Robbie was off, but he never let me see how bad he was, not until the day I took Vinny out of there and by then it had been about a year since Vinny's mother died."

I was on the edge on my seat as I listened. Dad had never willingly spoken to me about any of this, not that I ever wanted him to. I knew the brief details, but he could never speak about it for long.

"That day... that day I went over there and knocked on the door and there was no answer, but then I heard Vinny crying," Dad said, his voice shaking again. Mom reached out to grab his hand. "He was crying so loudly, so I panicked. I ended up breaking in through the window and ran to the living room."

He paused.

"Robbie was passed out on the couch, I literally thought he was dead." He let out a heavy breath. "Vinny was sitting on the floor, his hands and feet and face were bloody because there were broken beer bottles *everywhere* . He was holding a shard of glass and he had cut his face *so close* to his eye. He had glass in his feet, in his hands, and he was *wailing* and Robbie didn't even wake up."

I bit the inside of my cheek. Seeing my father so emotional was about to make the tears that had been waiting to fall start spilling down my cheeks.

Dad's eyes began tearing up. "And Robbie had just left his needles out on the coffee table, right in front of Vinny. He could have just grabbed it. And when I picked Vinny up from the floor, he clung to me so hard. When the ambulance came he wouldn't even let go of me to let to paramedics see him. He wasn't just in pain, he was *scared* . Come to find out later, Robbie had been screaming and throwing beer bottles around because he was angry that his supplier couldn't get him more drugs until the next day. He did it right in front of Vinny, could've hit him."

Dr. Brown kept her composure while the rest of us were getting emotional.

"Vinny just looked so sad and scared and *innocent* ," Dad said, wiping his eye. "And ever since then I swore I would protect him from anything. I would hold him so close that he could never be hurt, or scared, or alone again. And now I'm failing at it."

That finally caused my tears to fall silently down my face. And I suddenly felt *so* guilty. He blamed himself for everything, for what happened back then and what was happening now. But he didn't even know the whole

story. He didn't know the real reason behind my change in behavior. He thought it was *him* .

"That sounds like it was a traumatic experience for you," Dr. Brown responded when it seemed as though Dad was finished speaking. He and Mom both let silent tears fall while Logan pressed his lips together tightly, continuing to nervously bounce his leg. "And I want to thank you for sharing that. I know it wasn't easy. I'm glad that you thought about it in relation to what you're dealing with now as a family. That requires a lot of critical thought."

She looked around at each of us, her eyes lingering on me for a moment longer than everyone else, before she continued speaking.

"I don't want you to place blame on yourself though," she said. "Or consider yourself to be failing. You being here, willing to work on yourself and your family, is proof that you are not failing."

"I let this thing that happened fourteen years ago ruin my relationship with my son," Dad replied, wiping his eye again. "I thought I was protecting him, but I was damaging him. He's been having mental health struggles because of me, he's been putting himself in harms way because of me."

"Dad," I cried out before Dr. Brown could say anything. My voice cracked and all eyes were on me. I could feel the warm tears on my skin and there was nothing I could do to stop them. Dad looked at me with concern, his own eyes creating more tears.

I couldn't keep this in any longer, not with how it was affecting my family, making them blame themselves for how I am. Dad thought his protectiveness had damaged me. Mom thought her emotions had made me emotional. Logan thought he didn't pay enough attention to me. None of it was right and the guilt was eating me alive. If I had just said something sooner, none of them would be hurting the way that they are.

"I have to tell you something," I said between sobs.

"What is it?" Dad asked, he leaned forward in his seat with a contemplative look, like he was wondering if he should get up and comfort me.

"None of this is your fault," I said, tears blurring my vision. "I'm not damaged because of you."

His eyes widened. "No Vinny, I didn't mean that you're damaged. That was a poor choice of words. I'm sorry."

I furiously shook my head. "No, I am."

"No—" he started again.

"Something happened this summer," I cut him off, a sob ripping through my throat. "Something that changed me that I didn't tell anyone about. And now you're all blaming yourselves for how *I* act and how damaged I am and I can't take it anymore."

"Vinny, sweetie," Mom said, trying to hold back her cries. "What happened?"

My stomach dropped. There was no going back now. The truth had to come out. This had been eating at me for months. I had been in denial about it for too long, thinking if I wish the harsh reality away it would be as if it never happened. That wasn't the case, it never was.

I was stepping out into the open with no floor beneath me. I was sending myself in a free fall, not knowing what was on the other side. I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"I was raped."

**

Hi everyone, thanks for reading!

****IMPORTANT PLEASE READ****

I know this chapter was heavy and that's going to continue next chapter. There will be a TRIGGER WARNING next chapter as the chapter will start with a continuation of the therapy session.

I want to reiterate that I will NEVER go into explicit details about traumatic experiences, in this case, rape. Vinny will talk about what happened without explicit detail and he will talk about how it made him feel. But I will not be writing a scene in which it happens, nor will Vinny or any of the characters talk about it in explicit detail.

Please take care of yourself and respect your triggers. Don't read something if it is not safe for you you to do so.

The National Sexual Assault Hotline in the US is 1-800-656-4673 or you can go to rainn.org for help or assistance.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! I know a lot of you have already predicted this, so most of you will not be shocked. Is anything else shocking? Thoughts about the session?

43

TRIGGER WARNING: mentions sexual assault/rape

Vinny Taylor

My heart felt like it was about to leap out of my chest. I swore I could feel it jumping against my skin, begging me to stop whatever I was doing, to calm down. But there was nothing I could do to stop it. The rest of my body was still like I thought if I didn't move, nobody would be able to see me.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. All eyes were on me as we sat in a circle in Dr. Brown's office, my biggest secret hanging in the air and my warm tears pooling in my eyes and making my vision blurry.

I couldn't look at my mom cry. She didn't know what that did to me. But she let out a sob and I cried harder.

Dad pressed his knuckles to his mouth like he was trying to keep his own cries inside, but I saw the way he looked at me with so much devastation, like I had just told him the world was ending.

This was the first time I spoke about the rape out loud, the first time the mention of it lived anywhere but deep in my thoughts. But it always lingered in everything I did. It kept me up at night, made me lock all the doors and windows in the house, made the mere thought of someone touching me sexually make me want to throw up. Until Carson, that is, but even that took some time and there was still a ways to go. Just one thought, one reminder or feeling of being out of control, was enough to send me into a panic just as it had the other day in the park.

"That was very brave of you to say, Vinny," Dr. Brown started, her voice breaking through the sounds of cries that filled the room. "It takes a lot of courage to say that out loud, to let your family hear that."

I nodded and pulled my shirt up to dab the tears from my eyes.

"Do we need to take a break?" Dr. Brown asked, looking at each of us. "I know that was shocking to hear."

"I just— I—" Dad sniffled and furiously wiped at his leaking eyes.

I turned my attention to Logan, thinking any sight would be better than my father crying, but I was wrong. Logan sat silently, staring off into space with lines of tears down his face.

"Take your time," Dr. Brown told Dad before turning to me. "Vinny, do you need to take a break?"

I shook my head. No amount of time would make this any easier. It was out in the open now, I had to face it. If I left the room for a break, I was afraid I wouldn't return.

"I just don't know what to say," Dad finally said. "I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't that and I feel so *horrible* ."

"Vinny, would you like to discuss how you're feeling?" Dr. Brown asked. "You don't have to go into detail or reveal more then you'd like, but it might be good to let us know where your head is, might give you and your family some clarity."

I nodded. I felt that I owed it to them. I spent months being horrible to them and they had no idea why. They just had to deal with it until they finally couldn't take it anymore. I needed to do this not only for myself but for them.

"It's all comes back to me sometimes," I started, clearing my throat. My tears had finally slowed and a small whimper left my mouth rather than a sob ripping through me. "When I'm alone in the house, I check the locks constantly, check all the rooms. I can only go so far with Carson without panicking, and he's so patient with me, but sometimes it's too much for him too. He doesn't know, so he thinks it's *him* that did something wrong. I couldn't even—" I paused, not knowing if I wanted to say the next part to my family, but therapy was the only place I could say it. "I couldn't even get

an erection for the longest time. Just the thought of someone touching me sexually made me afraid."

I looked down at my shoes, not wanting to see the looks on their faces. No doubt Mom was crying harder and gripping Dad's hand for dear life.

"How did this happen?" Dad ask, his voice barely a whisper. " *When* did this happen?"

I looked up at him to see his red rimmed eyes staring so intently at me. He looked like he was pleading with me, pleading that I would just open up and let someone help me.

"It was the beginning of July" I said, taking a deep breath. "A few days after I came out. I spent the end of the school year and the beginning of summer with a few different guys, probably too many guys, and one of them got... possessive, so I ended it with him and he wasn't very happy about it. So one day he called me and we fought on the phone and then he just... showed up at the house."

"At the house?" Dad asked, his eyes widening. "This happened at our house?"

I nodded, swallowing around the lump in my throat. Dad seemed to look even more heartbroken at the realization that this happened at home, a place that was supposed to be safe for all of us, rather than at some party or something. Dad let out a shuddering breath and looked to me to continue. I spared a glance at Mom, whose crying seemed to slow, but her face was still blotchy and she didn't even bother to wipe the mascara stains from her cheeks.

"I was in my bedroom," I continued, clenching my hands in my lap. "He just came upstairs and locked the door. We fought, he cornered me and I didn't feel scared until then. He was *so angry* with me. He grabbed me and I tried to get him off, but I couldn't. He threw me face down on the bed and I felt frozen after that."

Sometimes it was hard for me to even sleep in there. I had taken to sleeping down on the couch some nights because I couldn't stand the thought of being in my room, reliving the experience every time I closed my eyes, knowing that it happened on the same bed I was lying in.

"I don't know if you remember that day," I said with a humorless laugh. "But I didn't leave my room all night. I didn't move at all. Not until later that night when you were all asleep."

I could tell by the look on their faces that they didn't know what day I was talking about. There were a lot of days they didn't see me because I had locked myself in my room. Those were days I spent at the window sill smoking, and turning to watch the door, making sure no one would come in.

Logan's lip wobbled and he ran his hand through his hair.

"Do I know the person who did this?" he asked in a low tone with a sniffle, his voice so low it was like he wanted me to be the only person to hear him.

I had to look away. I saw Logan clench his jaw out of the corner of my eye.

"Let's not focus on that right now," Dr. Brown interjected. "We should focus on Vinny and what he wants to tell, so we can all understand him better. Does anyone have anything they would like to say?"

"This happened under my roof," Dad said. "This happened under my roof and there was nothing I could do to stop it, nothing I could do to protect him. Vinny I'm so sorry." He paused, looking on the verge of tears again and trying to hold them in. "I'm so sorry you had to deal with this alone and that none of us did anything to help you sooner. I noticed something was off, but I didn't think it was *this* . I should have taken your mood change more seriously. *I'm sorry* ."

He was crying again, his hand covering his eyes. Mom was still so choked up that she couldn't say anything, though she looked as if she wanted to.

I stood up and walked over to her.

"Mom," I said, holding my arms out to her. She was up in an instant with her arms around me, squeezing me tighter than I knew she was even capable of.

"My baby," she said, burying her face into my chest. "My baby. I'm so sorry. I love you so much."

We stood there for a few moments, not saying anything while we embraced each other. When Mom pulled away, she held onto my hand like she was never going to let go of it. Logan moved over a seat so she could sit next to me. Her hand never left mine as we sat down.

"Our session is over," Dr. Brown said lightly. "But if you'd like to stay, we can extend it. I know this was a heavy session, so if you need some extra time, we will do that."

I was drained. No amount of extra time in therapy would change that and it seemed as though my family felt the same.

"I think we need to go home to process," Dad said, looking to each of us to see if we had any objections. I knew Logan and I couldn't wait to get out of there and Dad seemed to know that too.

"That's fine," Dr. Brown said. "If you, any of you, need anything you can always call my direct line."

We thanked her for her time and silently walked out of the office, Mom's hand still in mine like she was afraid if she let go I would vanish from her side.

"Do you want to walk with me?" Logan asked quietly as soon as we were outside. I didn't know what was worse: having to talk to Logan about this or sitting through the car ride home with my weeping parents.

"Yeah, I'll walk with you," I told him, looking down at Mom. She stared down at our entwined hands like she was savoring the moment before she had to let go.

"You boys will walk right home?" she asked. I knew it didn't actually matter. She just didn't want to be too far from me.

Logan nodded. "Yeah, Mom."

I glanced over at Dad who looked like he wanted to say something to me, but couldn't. I always seemed to bite his head off whenever he spoke to me. I couldn't really blame him for holding his tongue.

"I love you, boys," he finally said. "Be safe."

Logan and I walked in silence for a bit. I slipped my hands into my pockets, the late November air crisp and bitter. I could already feel my cheeks reddening as I got slapped with the cool breeze.

"I..." Logan started after a few more minutes of walking. "I'm sorry. For what happened to you. For the way I treated you because I thought you were just being difficult. I never expected this. I'm sorry."

"Logan..." I trailed. I didn't know what to say to him. I couldn't accept his apologies because I didn't think I deserved them.

"And I don't want to make this about me," he continued, staring straight ahead as he walked. "But it feels *so horrible* to know this happened to you, to know you had to go through this. I can't even begin to explain the pain in my heart right now. It's like it's ripping itself apart."

I looked at him and his troubled expression. His mouth was set in a frown, his jaw clenched and his lips twitching like he was trying not to cry again.

"I don't mind if you make it about you," I told him. "Because I'm fucking sick of talking about my feelings. I want to know how you feel."

He finally glanced at me and I could see the red in his eyes. He looked so broken.

"I just wish..." he trailed. "I wish I was better to you. So you didn't feel like you couldn't tell me. What happened to us Vin? We were so close and now the only time we have together is now."

"I was embarrassed about you seeing me with Spencer," I admitted, trying to shove my hands even deeper in my pockets. "And I... uh, I was ashamed about what happened. I was in denial about it for a while. Like I didn't know if it classified as rape, kinda thought I deserved it or had it coming for being with so many guys. I didn't want anyone to know."

"You didn't deserve it," Logan immediately responded with a serious expression. "It doesn't matter how many guys you were with. You didn't deserve it. You didn't have it coming."

I nodded. I knew that now, but that had taken a while for me to accept, that it wasn't my fault for sleeping around so much.

"I was also scared," I continued, clearing my throat. "About what he'd do if I started telling people."

Logan's eyes darkened. "Has he threatened you?"

I kept a straight face.

"Are you ever going to tell me who it is?" Logan asked after a moment of silence.

"It's probably better off if you didn't know."

Logan pressed his lips into a hard line and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before opening them back up again.

"So it's someone I know..."

"It wasn't Isaac, if that's what you're worried about," I told him.

Logan shook his head. "I wasn't worried about that. I have a feeling I know, but I'll keep it to myself if that's what you want."

I nodded, but didn't say anything else.

We continued walking for a little while longer before I spoke up again.

"Logan," I said, grabbing his attention. He glanced over at me. "You can't tell Carson. I don't want him to know."

Logan stopped beside me. "I wouldn't tell him, Vinny. I'm not going to take that choice from you."

I let out a sigh of relief.

"Enough about me," I said as we started walking again. "How's Dana? Is she—"

"She's pregnant," Logan confirmed. "She told me I could tell you, but I didn't know if I wanted to yet. I wanted to have time to process it I guess."

I nodded, understanding the need to keep some things to yourself all too well.

"What's she gonna do?"

He shrugged. "I don't know yet. I told her anything she wanted, I would support her no matter what."

"Even if she decides to keep it?"

He sighed, running his hand through his hair. "Yeah, even if she wants to keep it. It's her choice if she wants to go through with the pregnancy. All I can do is support her decisions."

"You're being surprisingly mature about this," I commented with raised eyebrows. "I guess you need to be if you're going to be a dad."

Logan let out a snort and shoved me lightly.

"I don't know if I'm ready to be an uncle though," I joked.

Logan smiled at me. "I think Uncle Vinny has a nice ring to it. You'll be the best uncle in the world when the time comes."

"Better than yours at least," I said, referencing my biological father.

Logan let out a laugh, looking up at the sky. "A lot better than mine."

***

I had messaged Carson to meet me at our tree, and unofficially apology spot, later that night. I didn't know how much longer he could take me fucking up and us exchanging apologies in a tree, but I hoped we could at least make it through the night. By the time I got there, Carson was already in the tree and he watched me as I climbed up.

"Did you get here first so I wouldn't get to watch you try to get up here?" I asked, gauging his mood. Carson was always calm and kind and ready to listen. I truly didn't deserve him.

"I've gotten better at it," he said, moving over so I could sit.

"I'll believe it when I see it."

We sat in silence for a few moments and I knew it was because he was waiting for me to speak. I had been the one to ask him to come here and I had been the one that ruined our date the other day. It was my responsibility to get the conversation going, to show him he didn't come out here in the middle of the night for no reason.

"So, I wanted to apologize," I started. "For how I acted the other day. I, uh, I get that I keep things bottled up and then I snap. I need to work on that."

Carson nodded and glanced over at me. He was always so forgiving and I never stopped to wonder how that affected him, if it ate at him because he was too nice to hold people accountable for how badly they treated him.

"Yeah, you do," he finally said. "Because I want this to work so bad, Vinny, I really do. I adore you, but I need you to meet me halfway."

He was right, of course, like always. But I didn't know if I could give that to him. I would tell myself that I could, that I could be more open with him and have control over my emotions. But that was the thing. When I

snapped, I couldn't control it. My emotions got the better of me. I didn't know what I could do about that.

"I want you to trust me," he said. "And I want to trust you. If there's no trust, then what is this?" He gestured between the two of us.

His eyes were wide and his mouth was pulled into a frown. He looked so vulnerable like this, laying his emotions and inner thoughts bare for me to see. I could tell he was insecure about our relationship, and unsure about me. I wanted nothing more than to promise him the world. I would grovel, get down on my knees and beg for him to keep wanting me, but in the end it was for him to decide if this was worth it, because for me it always would be.

"I trust you," I told him. It was myself I didn't trust. I was the one that couldn't keep my shit together. "I don't want to keep doing this, me holding everything in and snapping then crawling back to apologize. You don't deserve that. I'm sorry."

Carson nodded. "Can we have a redo date?"

I couldn't stop myself from smiling. "Yeah, I'd like a redo date."

"And will you come over for dessert tomorrow?" he asked. "I know you have dinner plans with your family."

I had almost forgotten about Thanksgiving, the holiday I could barely stomach the thought of.

"Yeah, I'll go over," I agreed, placing my hand over his.

"Spencer might be there," he warned. "Paul's coming over, I don't know if he's taking Spencer."

"It's fine," I assured him, thought I was glad for the warning so I would have time to mentally prepare myself.

"And we can do the redo date on Friday?" Carson suggested.

I leaned in for a chaste kiss on the lips.

"Sounds perfect."

If only everything was as simple as a redo.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading.

Let me know what you thought of the chapter!!

44

TRIGGER WARNING: brief mention of sexual assault/rape

Carson Hughes

Football games just weren't the same without Logan sitting beside me while the two of us thought about being anywhere but on the crowded bleachers watching a game neither of us cared about. He was the only one I could complain to about it. Even Isaac seemed to quietly enjoy watching Seth throw a ball for three hours. I didn't get it. Neither did Logan and he wasn't even here to suffer with me.

Logan had said he wanted to spend the day with his family, telling us they had a rough therapy session the day before and he didn't feel like going out today. Of course, we all understood that, but I couldn't help the slight irritation in the back of my mind that Vinny hadn't told me it was a rough session when we met up last night. I didn't need to know the details, I just wanted to know that he was okay. Maybe I wasn't even justified in wanting to know that.

Without Logan here to entertain my complaints, the game dragged on longer than usual. Our team was winning, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

I managed to slip away just as the second half started, finding Spencer against the fence taking pictures for year the yearbook.

"Hey," I greeted him, causing him to lower the camera from his face.

"Hey," he replied. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"You too," I said, sliding my hands into the pockets of my sweatshirt. "Are you coming to my house today with your dad?"

Spencer paused for a moment before replying. "I was planning on it. Unless there's a reason I shouldn't."

"No, it's fine," I said. "Vinny will be there for dessert."

Spencer sighed. "Great."

I quirked an eyebrow up, glancing at him with confusion.

"Is that a problem?" I asked, probably sounding more rude than I intended.

"No," Spencer said, shaking his head. "I'm going to have to get used to it."

"You know, Vinny told me what happened with you two," I told him.

"Carson, *I* don't even know what happened," Spencer said, putting his camera down and letting it dangle from the strap around his neck. "We fought, we were both emotional, but there's something else that I don't know, something he's not telling either of us."

I hated the thought of Vinny hiding the entire truth from me, but Spencer was probably right. Vinny kept a lot of things inside. It wasn't a far fetched idea that he had kept some of this story on the inside as well.

"I don't want to argue with you, I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

"I feel bad enough about it," Spencer said, picking his camera back up. "And confused."

He snapped a picture of Seth just as he was throwing the ball, then quickly turned and got one of Darren catching it.

"Do you like taking pictures of the football games?" I asked, hoping a subject change would ease the tension that was suddenly between us.

"Not really," he admitted.

"Then why do it?" I asked. "Aren't you in charge of photography for yearbook? You can have someone else do it."

Spencer shook his head. "The school wants perfect shots of the players. The principal wants the players to have a lot of good shots for newspapers or whatever, make them look good to colleges. Since I'm head of photography, that falls on me."

I nodded.

Spencer shrugged as he continued. "Makes me look good to have them too and I have a lot for my portfolio, so I can't complain too much."

"Well, I'm sure they're all great," I told him truthfully. I remembered the pictures I had seen hung all over his walls the one time I had been in his bedroom. The pictures of Vinny that I wanted to take for myself.

"Can you talk to Isaac for me?" Spencer blurted, not even looking at me. His eyes were focused on the game like he was waiting for the perfect moment to snap a picture.

"You want me to talk to Isaac?" I asked, confused. "About what?"

"Forget it."

"No, seriously," I said. "I will, but I need to know what you want me to talk to him about."

"No, it's stupid," he responded with a sigh. "I need to stop chasing people who are obviously not interested in me for anything other than a quick fuck. I need to get over it."

I didn't tell him that I thought Isaac returned those feelings, but I still felt badly for him. Spencer had gone through the same with Vinny, feeling only desirable enough for something casual, but not having someone willing to commit.

I decided then that I would still talk to Isaac, at least convince him to give Spencer some closure.

Spencer snapped another photo as Seth threw a touchdown pass. Everyone in the stands stood up in excitement and I took the chance to make my way back to my seat beside Isaac.

"Where did you go?" he asked as I sat down.

"I was just talking to Spencer for a bit," I told him. All he did was press his lips together in a line. Other than that, there was no reaction. That was how I knew there was something going on in his head. He was too focused on trying to look nonchalant that he looked awkward like he was hiding something.

Thankfully, the game ended not long after that and we filed out of the bleachers with the rest of the student body to wait down at the locker room exit with Hadley as she waited on Darren. When he finally emerged, Hadley threw herself into his arms and he instantly grabbed onto her.

"Great game!" she exclaimed, kissing his cheek.

Darren chuckled, placing a kiss on her lips. "Thank you, babe."

Darren set Hadley down on the ground, throwing his arm around her shoulder.

"Thanks for coming, guys," he said. "No Logan?"

"The Taylors are having some family time," Hadley instantly replied and I was glad she didn't speak any further. He didn't need to know that Logan had told us it was because of a bad day in therapy.

"Speaking of family," Darren said, turning to Hadley. "You're still coming to my mom's for dinner?"

Hadley happily nodded.

"I can't believe you guys actually celebrate Thanksgiving," Archie said with a scoff, crossing his arms over his chest. He said this every year.

"You don't?" Darren asked.

Hadley rolled her eyes. "No, Archie's family are all anti-Thanksgiving. And he reminds us every year."

I wouldn't admit it out loud, mostly because I would never hear the end of it from Archie, but I was sort of on board with the whole anti-Thanksgiving thing. I wasn't a fan of the food and before this year it was always just my mom and me. We usually ended up at the Taylor's house at some point when their family had gone.

"You're celebrating genocide," Archie deadpanned.

"He's right, let's skip Thanksgiving," Isaac responded.

I looked over at Dana, who seemed to be quieter than usual. She wrapped her arms around herself as she listened to the conversation taking place.

"Hey," I said, walking over to her. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine," she said, mustering up a smile. "Why?"

"You seem quiet today," I told her.

"I'm fine," she assured me. "I just don't feel well."

I nodded in understanding.

"I better get going though," Dana said to everyone. "I have to go to Logan's for dinner."

"Will I see you later tonight for Black Friday shopping?" Hadley asked.

Dana smiled at her. "Wouldn't miss it, Hads."

Soon after, we all went our separate ways.

***

Vinny Taylor

Spending the day with my family the day after that therapy session almost just as difficult as the session itself. Mom wouldn't stop looking at me. It was like she was afraid that if she took her eyes off of me something would happen.

Dad was faring a lot worse. I didn't think he slept at all the night before. He had been awake when I came in from seeing Carson. And now I was helping him clean the house while Logan helped Mom cook.

We had somehow gotten roped into hosting Thanksgiving this year by Grandma. Dad was ready to call it all off after yesterday but then that would leave him having to explain why to his mother. And I didn't want her knowing. So we agreed that we would all act normal today despite what had happened the day before.

Now I was helping Dad clean for their arrival and it was tense to say the least. He was scrubbing the table so hard I thought he was going to put his hand right through it.

"You're not doing good at acting normal," I told him as I dusted off the mantle.

"I don't want to have to entertain them today, I really don't," he replied and a hurried tone.

Grandma had invited herself over along with my Aunt Marcy and her family while the rest of the family was going to Robbie's. There was no doubt Grandma only wanted to come here so she could try to convince us to go to Robbie's with her after and Dad wasn't going to be able to keep his cool when she did.

"If she says anything to you..." Dad trailed, stopping what he was doing. "If she crosses a line, you do whatever you need to. Yell at her, go upstairs, go to Carson's early, I don't care. I'm not letting her be a fucking intrusive bitch. Not today. Same with my sister."

"Trust me, I'm out of here if she pisses me off," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Good," Dad said with a nod, going back to the table. "Then after today we can... talk about what we're going to do."

"What we're going to do...?"

"About that boy," he said in a gruff tone, looking down at the table as he scrubbed it.

My eyes darkened. "Dad, there's nothing we can do."

It was too late. I had kept it quiet for too long and now there was no evidence of it ever happening other than what lived in both of our heads. It was his word against mine and nothing could come from that. It was useless.

"Like hell we can't," he snapped.

"You think I haven't thought about that?" I asked him, my voice raising as I set the duster down. "There's no proof! It's my word against his!"

"That's why we get a lawyer," he said, standing up straight from being hunched over the table. "They can tell us our options."

" *Dad* ," I said, pleading. "I don't want to do that. Then I'm going to have to fucking relive it every day. Talking to cops, to lawyers, to judges. I don't want to go through that. I want to fucking move on."

His gaze softened and I hated that the way he looked at me made me feel like a little kid. It was like how he looked at me whenever I got hurt or was sad when I was small. It was like it hurt him too.

"He can't get away with it, Vin," he said in a soft tone. "One way or another there has to be consequences for him, and retribution for you. We'll figure out what to do—"

"There is *nothing* we can do!" I shouted, my voice cracking. "No one will believe me and even if they do, there's no evidence! No amount of consequences or retribution is going to change that it happened, Dad. It did

and *I'm* the one that has to live with it, not you. You don't get to decide how I cope. You don't get to decide how I deal with what only affects *me* !"

Dad didn't have a chance to respond before Logan came rushing into the room, wearing a stupid apron around his waist.

"Hey!" Logan snapped, narrowing his eyes at Dad. "You said we weren't talking about this today, so leave him alone about it. We have enough shit to deal with today, you don't need to make it worse."

"Right," Dad sighed. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"How about in fucking therapy?" I hissed.

Dad was about to respond before Logan cut him off.

"Dad, not today," he said. "Leave him alone."

He nodded and Logan left the room after sparing me a glance.

"I'm sorry, Vinny," Dad said after a few moments of silence. "This has affected me more than you know and it's getting hard for me to control my emotions."

At least he was being honest about it. That was something I had to credit him for because it was something I couldn't even do.

"You keep saying sorry, but you don't change how you act," I said, picking up the duster. "It's getting old."

"I know."

It was hypocritical of me to point this out to him as if I didn't do the same with Carson. I was more like my father than I cared to admit.

"Let's just forget about it for now," Dad continued. "We're going to need to be a team against your grandmother."

I nodded in agreement.

If one thing was for certain, it was that we banded together when it came to her. No matter how much we fought, when it came to Grandma, I had his back and he had mine. She was a force to be reckoned with and who knew what would happen if I let her get under my skin.

"She better be on her best behavior," I said, glancing over at him.

He snorted. "You know she won't."

And of course, a few moments later that woman was letting herself into our house an hour before we told her to be here like she owned the place. Dad sent her a strained smile and bent down to kiss her on the cheek.

"The food's not done yet?" she asked, looking around. "And this place is filthy."

I had to bite my tongue. If I didn't, my words would send her to an early grave.

"Vincent, have you lost weight?" she asked, walking over to me and grabbing onto my shoulders. "You're such a handsome boy. You'd be even more handsome if you had some more meat on these bones."

"Enough, Ma, he's fine," Dad interjected. "Why don't you go see if the food is done?"

She didn't have to be told twice. My grandmother was the nosiest woman in the world. If she wanted to know something, she would snoop around until she found out, no matter how unimportant it was.

"If Grandma's here, Marcy's not far behind," I said, looking out the window at Grandma's crookedly parked car.

"I was hoping Marcy would cancel," Dad replied. "Apparently she and her husband have been having issues and you know she'll fight with him right here in front of everyone."

"Think she'll get another divorce?"

"I don't know. Probably."

Just as the words left his mouth, Marcy pulled up to the house and parked behind Grandma's car. Luna started running around the living room, excited that another person had pulled up to the house. She was going to be so disappointed when it turned out to be my Aunt Marcy and her husband, who I didn't even know the name of with, and her kids.

"Girl, you are not going to like this," I told Luna, getting her to stand beside me as I pet behind her ears. Her tail was wagging uncontrollably, hitting the side of my leg.

Dad let out a loud groan. "I am not ready to deal with this bitch, I'm really not."

I couldn't help but laugh at his words as we watched Marcy and her husband get out of the car along with two of Marcy's kids she shares with her first husband.

Marcy barged into the house just as her mother did and her eyes immediately shot to me.

"Did you gain weight?" she asked. "You look good."

"Is everyone going to comment on my weight?" I asked, shooting a look to Dad. "Do you want me to comment on yours?" I asked her and she glared at me.

"Marcy!" Grandma called out from the kitchen. "Come help in the kitchen! It's an emergency!"

And with that Marcy rushed out of the room, leaving us with the husband and my two cousins, Mark and Helena. We all awkwardly stood there in silence until I let out a heavy sigh.

"I can't fucking wait for this day to be over," I said, leaving the room to enter the kitchen.

Grandma and Marcy stood in front of the stove while Logan and Mom stood back, both of them looking annoyed.

"What's the emergency?" I asked, standing beside Mom.

She put her arm around me with a glare directed toward the two women in front of the oven.

"That the turkey is taking too long," she said. "It needs about another hour, you know, like around the time I said dinner would be served?"

I snorted, smiling down at her annoyed expression. Her lips were turned to a frown and her eyebrows were raised on her forehead as she watched Grandma and Marcy stare into the oven as if their eyes would make the turkey cook faster.

Mom started shaking her head at them and let out a deep sigh before turning to me.

"Sweetie, can you go set the table?" she asked in a soft tone.

I nodded, Logan following me back into the dining room where we silently put out a place setting for everyone. When we were finished, I took Luna outside to burn some of her energy and Logan joined me. The two of us didn't speak until Dana came into the backyard.

"I saw your grandmother's car here and thought I'd chance going in through the basement," she said with a grin, throwing her arms around Logan's waist as she walked up to him.

"Marcy's here too," I warned her with a brief look before tossing a frisbee for Luna.

Logan kissed the top of Dana's head as she let out a long sigh.

"Think they'll stay long?" she asked.

"Probably just for dinner and then they'll storm out of here when Dad says we aren't going to Robbie's with them," Logan replied.

"Do they really expect that you will?"

I shrugged, taking the frisbee from Luna's mouth when she brought it back.

"Grandma thinks if she pushes long enough, it'll happen," I told her.

It was a moment later that Dad called out the back door that dinner was ready and the three of us begrudgingly walked into the house and to the dining room. It didn't take long for Grandma and Marcy to start being horrible while Marcy's husband and her kids looked at them with expressions of embarrassment.

"Vincent, put more food on your plate," Grandma said, cutting a piece of her turkey. "That's why you're so skinny."

"He's fine, Ma," Dad immediately cut in.

"You see him all the time Jeff, you become blind to how he changes," Marcy added, taking a sip of wine. "We see it."

That was funny considering an hour ago she told me I looked like I gained weight.

"You know, Robbie's really fit now," Grandma said, Marcy nodding in agreement. "He follows a strict diet and exercise routine."

It was like the two of them didn't realize that they were the only two talking, that they were making everyone else here uncomfortable.

"Good for him," Dad said, his voice strained as he gripped his silverware so tight that his knuckles were white.

"He's been asking about you, Vinny," Marcy told me, making all eyes go to me. "We think he'd really appreciate—"

"Just shut up, Marcy," I snapped, slamming my silverware down. "I don't know what your fucking obsession is with me going to see Robbie, but just shut the fuck up about something you know nothing about."

"Vincent!" Grandma exclaimed. "Don't speak to her like that for telling the truth! Robbie has been wondering about you lately. I was hoping at least you would come with us to his house—"

I stood up, looking over at Dad who was glowering in his seat. I placed my silverware on my plate before picking it up.

"I'm done. That was a nice five minutes," I said before turning on my heel and walking into the living room.

It didn't take long for Dana and Logan to follow, the three of us finishing our Thanksgiving dinner on the couch.

"Well, it lasted longer than I thought it would, honestly," Logan commented from between Dana and me.

I snorted, shoveling some mashed potatoes in my mouth. Mom came in a moment later, holding her own plate as she went to sit on the loveseat to finish her meal.

"You've had enough?" I asked her.

She sent me a look with narrowed eyes, though I knew they weren't directed at me.

"I'm sure your father will be in here in about two minutes."

And she was right. Dad came storming in with his plate in hand and sat down next to Mom on the loveseat.

"Now, this is much better company," he said, setting his plate in his lap. "Those two are crazy, I swear I must have been adopted."

I wanted to tell him he was a little crazy too, just in a different way, but I figured I'd save that for a different day.

When Marcy and her family left, Marcy didn't even look in our direction while her husband shot an apologetic look at each of us. Those two would

be getting divorced in no time. Grandma stepped into the living room a moment later, her coat already on.

"I wish you would just get over yourself, Jeff," Grandma said, earning a glare from my mother. "I want what's best for you and Robbie and Vinny."

"Bye Mother," was all he said and then she was out the door.

"It could have been way worse," I said after I saw her car pull away from the curb.

"That's true," Dad said, nodding in agreement.

Logan leaned forward and placed his empty plate on the coffee table in front of him. As soon as he leaned back in his seat, his leg started bouncing like it always did when he got nervous. I glanced over at Dana to see that she was staring down at her lap and then I understood what was about to happen.

"We can brighten up now, they're gone," Dad said in a light tone.

"Do you guys want pie? That'll make everyone happy," Mom said, standing up and heading back to the kitchen.

We were quiet until she returned with paper plates and the pie, setting it on the table. Once everyone had a slice, besides me since I would be eating at Carson's later, Logan cleared his throat and looked over at our parents.

"We need to tell you something," Logan told them, causing a look of concern from them both. "I know yesterday was hard, but I think the sooner we tell you this, the better."

He looked to Dana, who nodded in agreement. I reached out for her behind Logan and she sent me a grateful smile as she gripped onto my hand.

"I, um, I—" Dana paused, then looked at Logan. "I..."

Logan placed his hand on her knee. "Dana's pregnant."

I immediately looked to Mom and Dad to see their reactions. Dad looked almost relieved, but I supposed that was because anything was better than what I had admitted yesterday.

"Do your parents know, sweetie?" Mom asked. She was being surprisingly calm, but then again, she was a woman who had experienced pregnancy. She could relate to Dana better than anyone else in the room.

Dana shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "They don't know. They're not going to be happy. I don't know what they'll do."

"You don't think they'll hurt you, do you?" Dad asked, leaning forward in his seat.

"No, I don't think so," Dana sheepishly replied. "I don't know if they'll let me stay there—"

"Then you'll stay here," Dad interjected, looking at Mom for confirmation. She nodded, looking at him briefly before turning back to Dana. "We can furnish the basement. It was supposed to be my workout area, but I think I used it once."

"That equipment really was a waste of money," Mom said, knocking her knee into his. "Do you have an OB/GYN, Dana?"

"No, I just went to a clinic."

"I'll set you up with one," Mom said. "I know some people."

Dana nodded and finally let the tears fall. "Thank you."

Mom stood up and held her hand out to Dana who instantly took it.

"Come with me," she said, hugging Dana at her side. "We can go talk about this."

The rest of us were silent until they left the room.

"You boys are killing me lately," Dad said with a sigh, leaning back on the loveseat. "I'm gonna have a full head of gray hair tomorrow."

"You already have that," I replied, earning a glare from him.

"Is it really okay if she stays here?" Logan asked. "Because I really think her parents are going to kick her out. They already don't like me very much and they're crazy anti-premarital sex. Like the first time they did it was on their wedding night."

"Yes, she can stay here, she's family," Dad assured him. "Maybe you should've worn a fucking condom or something though, Logan, my God."

"I did!" he defended. "Her parents wouldn't let her get birth control."

"That's fucked up," I said, standing from the couch. "Anyway, I have to go to my boyfriend's house."

"At least neither of you can get pregnant," Dad said with a sigh.

"You really think I can have sex with him?"

Dad's eyes widened. "Right, God, sorry."

I laughed as I moved toward the door. "I was half kidding."

And then I left Logan to the lecture he was no doubt about to get.

**

Thanks for reading everyone!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

45

Carson Hughes

I saw Vinny pull up to the house through the living room window and met him at the front door, greeting him with a kiss.

"How was dinner with your family?" I asked him and I pulled him inside.

"Sucked," he said, leaning into my side. "Me, Logan, Dana, and our parents ended up eating in the living room."

"That bad?"

Vinny shrugged. "I was just sick of their shit before it even started."

I looked down at him, his brow furrowed and his mouth in a frown. I wanted to be able to smooth all that tension away and hide him from anything that put that look on his face.

I stopped the two of us before we entered the kitchen where Mom, Paul, and Spencer waited. I barely saw the look of confusion on Vinny's face before I leaned down and kissed him. His frown melted away against my lips and his hands found their way up to my hair.

"What was that for?" he asked breathlessly as I pulled away.

I smiled. "I just wanted to."

I could see red creeping up his cheeks as he looked away from me with a sheepish smile. When I saw him like this, it was hard to imagine that the two of us had fought just the other day.

I pushed that thought out of my head. We were going to have a good night and then we would have a redo date tomorrow and everything would be fine. We would be fine.

"Spencer in there?" Vinny asked, the smiling fading from his face.

I nodded. "Is that okay?"

Vinny took a deep breath. "I'm fine."

He grabbed my hand and started toward the kitchen. I couldn't help but watch him and swell with pride as we moved forward. Vinny was trying harder to make this work than I ever gave him credit for. Despite his feelings about Spencer or their rocky history, he wanted to be here for me. I had never thought about how hard this could be for him, to spend time with Spencer despite what had happened between them.

"Hey," I said, stopping us just before the entrance to the kitchen. "If you want to leave at any time, we can."

Vinny raised his eyebrows at me. "I told you I'm fine."

"I know, but just thought I'd throw that out there."

He rolled his eyes but then leaned upward to catch my lips with his briefly.

"You're cute," he said before pulling me into the kitchen behind him.

Mom, Paul, and Spencer sat at the kitchen table with various desserts resting on the table. All their eyes turned to us as we entered the kitchen. Mom immediately got up from the table with her arms held out for Vinny.

"Vinny!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around him. He stumbled slightly with a laugh before putting his arms around her. "It's so good to see you. I'm so happy you could make it. Now we can have some dessert!"

She pulled away, but kept him at arms length, her hands on his shoulders.

"You could have started without me," he told her.

"Absolutely not," she denied. "How is everyone? I haven't seen your parents in forever."

"They're good," he replied as Mom led him over to the table. I followed behind the two of them, taking the seat beside Spencer while Vinny sat across from me and beside Mom with Paul on her other side.

Mom started cutting slices of pies as Paul and Vinny greeted each other. Spencer and Vinny wouldn't so much as look at each other, but neither of the adults noticed.

"Did you have enough to eat, Vinny?" Mom asked as she placed a plate of pie in front of him. "We have a ton of leftovers if you want any more food."

"I'm alright," he said. "Thank you though."

"Are you sure? We have turkey, stuffing, casserole—"

"Mom, he's fine," I said in a gentle, yet urgent tone. She didn't know any of his struggles with eating, but the last thing I wanted was for her to unknowingly upset him.

"Sorry, it's a mom thing," she said with a laugh. "I have to make sure everyone's fed."

Vinny nodded in agreement. "My mom's the same way."

"That's my special apple pie," Paul said, gesturing toward the plate in front of Vinny. "I used to have to make two because he and Spencer used to eat so much of it."

Mom laughed and I put on a smile despite the awkward tension between Spencer and Vinny, neither of them looking like they were reminiscing on the fond memory.

"It's so good," Vinny said, clearing his throat before sticking his fork in the pie and taking a bite.

I mimicked his actions and was pleasantly surprised by the taste in my mouth. I nodded at Paul, showing my agreement with Vinny.

"That must be a secret talent of his," Mom said with a fond smile at her boyfriend. "Paul is good at all sorts of desserts."

"Has he made you lava cake?" Vinny asked and Mom shook her head. "Have him make you lava cake."

"That's my secret weapon," Paul said with a chuckle when Mom looked at him with raised eyebrows. "I was saving it for something special."

I looked at Vinny and saw that he was almost done with his slice of pie and he was eyeing the dessert in front of him like he was ready for seconds.

I was surprised at how easily Vinny fell into conversation with my mom. He had always said that he wanted her to like him. What he didn't know was that he could do pretty much anything and she would still adore him. Though, it warmed my heart that he seemed to feel so comfortable with her even though Paul and Spencer were here.

When we finished dessert, Vinny having two slices of Paul's apple pie, Mom started clearing the table, sending the rest of us into the living room.

"Let us do this, honey," Mom said as I began helping her.

I turned to see that Paul had come back into the kitchen, meaning Vinny and Spencer had been left alone in the living room. She didn't have to tell me twice. I scurried out of the kitchen and stopped just before the doorway of the living room when I heard Vinny and Spencer talking in hushed tones.

"—can't even look at me," Spencer said.

"Have you ever thought that it's not just about you?" Vinny asked. "That maybe I have my own shit to deal with and you're only part of it?"

"Right because that's what you always do," Spencer replied with a scoff. "You get into your head, you *hate* yourself sometimes, and you take it out on the people around you. You've always been like that, but I always excused it because I had feelings for you. Now I see it for what it is."

"And what is it?"

"It's toxic, Vin!" Spencer said, his voice raising slightly. "You're not going to have anyone left if you keep it up. The sad part for me is that I'd go running back to you if you gave me the slightest chance."

"Spence..."

"Not like that," he clarified. "I'm talking about our friendship."

I felt bad for listening in, but I was frozen in place, not wanting to interrupt but unable to walk away.

"If you just told me what I could do to make you stop hating me..." Spencer trailed.

"There's nothing you can do, it's not just about you."

I couldn't listen any longer. My conscience wouldn't allow it. I stepped into the living room, both of their heads turning to me from where they sat on opposite ends of the couch.

"Um..." I started. "I, uh, heard some of that. I'm sorry."

Vinny's eyes softened. "None of it's a secret."

He motioned for me to sit beside him and he immediately buried himself in my side, snaking his arm around my waist. Spencer looked away from us but didn't say anything.

I hated the tension in the room. Vinny's words replayed in my head, making me realize just how much he kept hidden. *It's not just about you* . Then what was it about? What had plagued him and ruined his relationship with Spencer if it wasn't Spencer's actions alone?

I looked down at Vinny, his head resting on my shoulder. He looked content even with the furrow in his brow. He looked up at me, shot me a small, closed lip smile, then leaned up and gave a brief kiss to my jaw.

I let out a shuddered sigh and turned on the TV.

A little while later, Paul and Spencer left since Mom had to get some rest before her overnight shift at the hospital. Vinny stayed and the two of us spread out on the couch, him still under my arm.

"There's going to be no funny business while I'm gone tonight, right?" Mom asked, her hands on her hips as she stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"You don't have to worry about a thing," Vinny told her with a grin. She looked as if she didn't believe him but nodded and went up the stairs anyway.

"You tell your parents you're staying here tonight?" I asked him.

Vinny looked up at me, a brow arched in question.

"I don't want Jeff going crazy wondering where you are," I explained.

"He knows where I am."

I didn't push him further, though I wanted to. Jeff was unsupportive of our relationship enough already, but there was nothing I could do to make Vinny appease him.

"You know, I overheard him telling you to dump me," Vinny admitted and my eyes widened instantly. I braced myself for his anger but it never came.

"You did?"

"Yeah," he said. "It was fucked up for him to do that."

I nodded in agreement and continued looking at him with a confused expression.

"I'm sorry, I, uh, I didn't realize you overheard," I stammered guiltily. I should've told him. I never should have kept it to myself. "I should've told you..."

"I understand why you didn't," he replied, surprising me. "I'm not mad."

"You're not?"

He shook his head, sitting up and placing himself on my lap, his legs on either side of mine. My eyes widened again at our change in position. Vinny started kissing up my neck slowly, causing me to shudder at the contact.

"No, I'm not," he said against my skin. "It's kinda hot that you stood up to him, didn't bend to his will..."

He was going to be the death of me. I leaned back on the couch as Vinny continued kissing up my neck to my jaw.

"Why, uh, why bring this up now?" I asked, letting out a breath. "Fuck..." He sucked on my skin, moving his hips over mine and causing my head to spin.

"I wanted to show you my appreciation," he said, his breath warm against my neck. His hand found it's way under my shirt, moving up my stomach slowly.

"Vinny..." I trailed, hating that I had to put a stop to this. "My mom's upstairs."

He chuckled, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin beneath my jaw.

"I'm not going to fuck you on the couch, Carson."

And with that he got off my lap, leaving me sitting there breathless as he sat beside me. He wore a mischievous grin that told me he knew the exact effect he had on me.

"We'll have to save that for later," he said.

"So you just wanted to tease me?"

"Admit it, you thought it was hot."

"Of course, I did!"

Vinny let out a booming laugh, looking at me with that sparkle in his eye that I loved so much.

"Don't worry, I'll get you off later," he said.

I blushed at his words.

I groaned. "You drive me crazy."

All he did was laugh again.

***

Vinny was already awake, scrolling through his phone by the time I woke up the next morning. I glanced at him, the sunshine coming in from the window making his skin glow and the mess of hair on his head appear lighter than usual. I placed my hand on his bare chest and kissed his cheek.

"Good morning," he said with a smile, his voice clear of sleep.

"Morning," I rasped, turning on my side to face him completely. "What time is it?"

"Almost eleven."

I sat up with wide eyes. "Why did you let me sleep for so long?"

Vinny shrugged. "You're cute when you sleep."

I let out a breathy laugh, leaning back against the headboard.

"Did you sleep well at least?" I asked and he just shrugged again.

"As well as I usually do," he said, putting his phone down on the blanket. "Maybe a little better actually."

I hummed, lightly tracing circles on his chest with my finger. He let out a content sigh as he looked down at my hand.

"Wanna go get breakfast?" I asked.

"Does that count as our redo date?"

I laughed. "No, it doesn't."

"Then yes," he said, pushing the covers off and standing from the bed before rummaging through my dresser.

"What are you doing?" I asked, sitting up completely and bracing my hands behind me on the bed.

"I didn't bring a change of clothes," he replied, pulling a shirt out from the top drawer. "This will fit."

He threw the shirt on over his head. It was dark green and fell loose on his shoulders. Vinny adjusted the shirt slightly, checking in the mirror that hung on my closet door and then turned around to show me.

"See?" he said with a grin before picking his pants up from the floor and putting them on.

"Looks good," I told him, standing from the bed. "That's my favorite shirt."

Vinny rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. "Sure it is."

"It is!" I exclaimed, standing up from the bed and rushing to him. I put my arms around his waist and squeezed him against me, kissing his cheek. "I don't lie."

Vinny chuckled, pushing my face back from his.

After we finished getting ready, I drove the two of us to the diner across town. When we sat down at our table, we were greeted by none other than Thomas. I tried to suppress my groan, but Vinny made his dismay clear.

"Since when did you start working here?" Vinny asked him, setting his menu down on the table.

Thomas grinned, glancing at me for a moment before turning his attention back to Vinny.

"A few weeks ago. My sister got me the job," he said. His sister. Crystal. Right. "Now I see why you kept turning me down, Vin, you have *him* ."

Thomas pointed over at me with his thumb, chuckling as he pulled a notepad out of his apron.

"You were trying to get with him?" I asked Thomas, my eyes widening.

"Who wouldn't?" he replied, pulling a pen that rested behind his ear. "I didn't know he had a boyfriend, let alone it being you."

I turned to face Vinny whose cheeks turned red in either anger or embarrassment.

We didn't say anything to each other as Thomas took our drink orders, but I spoke up as soon as he left the table.

"You didn't tell him you have a boyfriend?" I asked in a hushed tone, slightly leaning over the table toward Vinny.

"He got me cigarettes, Carson, I didn't try to have full conversations with him," he replied, picking the menu back up.

"But he was trying to hook up with you and you didn't say anything?"

Vinny placed the menu back down and stared at me.

"What are you trying to say, Carson?"

I was left dumbfounded because *what was* I trying to say? That I didn't trust him? Or that I was so insecure about our relationship that every time I learned something new about Vinny it made me feel like he was always hiding something from me?

"Nothing, nothing," I said, let out a breath. "I'm sorry."

"We're not fighting today," he said. "Not about this."

Conversation with Thomas for the rest of the night stayed at a minimum. He must have noticed the awkward air whenever he was around and avoided making it worse. That was one thing I had always noticed about him. He knew how to read a room.

When we were done with breakfast, I drove Vinny back to my house where he got his car and drove home while I got everything ready for our redo date.

I wanted it to be perfect this time, so I changed the setting to another outdoor area across town and away from the park. We didn't need to be reminded of the last time the whole time we were there, so I thought a change in setting would be best.

I was going to bring him to one of the walking trail areas that had a clearing near the gorge. There were areas to sit and lights all around and a small waterfall into the flowing river. This time it would be perfect.

However, when I picked Vinny up from his house later that day, I could tell he was in a sour mood. He got into the passenger's seat of my car and slammed the door before roughly pulling the seatbelt over himself and clicking it into place.

"What happened in the last few hours since I saw you that made you this upset?" I asked, turning in my seat to face him.

He had his arms crossed over his chest and his lips pressed tightly together like he was trying not to scream.

"My fucking dad is bugging me about shit," he said in an irritated tone. "And my stupid grandmother won't stop talking about Robbie and how much he wants to see me."

"Your grandmother is there?"

"She's been there since I got home!" he exclaimed. "Telling us all about how great it was when she went to Robbie's yesterday and she's trying to guilt me into going to see him."

"And you don't want to do that."

He turned to face me and let out a sigh, running a hand through his hair.

"I..." he trailed, sighing again. "I don't know. I guess part of me is nosy and wants to see what he's doing but I don't want her to think that her nagging is working."

I was surprised to hear him admit that. He had never expressed any desire to see his biological father, but I guessed it was something even he didn't know about himself. The curiosity was shoved so far back in his mind he didn't always notice it.

"I guess I kinda also want him to see that I'm fine without him," Vinny admitted, leaning back in his seat. "I mean, I'm not really *fine* , but that has nothing to do with him not being around."

"You should only go if it's on your terms, not your grandmother's and not his," I said and Vinny nodded in agreement.

"Enough about that," he said. "Let's do this redo date."

I smiled at him before putting the car into drive and pulling away from the curb. I rested my arm on the center console and Vinny was quick to slip his hand into mine.

We sat in comfortable silence on the way to the gorge and Vinny turned to smile at me when he realized where we were.

"This is perfect," he said. "I haven't been here in years."

"Me neither," I replied.

I parked the car and the two of us got out to retrieve the picnic items from the trunk.

Vinny was still wearing the shirt he had taken from my dresser this morning, along with the jacket I had given him on our double date with Logan and Dana.

We set up the blanket and sat down with the basket. I made a mental note that I wouldn't cross over the invisible line between us unless he initiated it. I still wasn't sure what had caused such a reaction from him the last time, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

We ate our dinner, having small talk, before I took out some desserts.

"I can't believe Thomas is working at the diner now," Vinny commented, biting into a chocolate covered strawberry. "Guess we should cross that off of places we can go."

"The food is so good though," I said with a laugh. "And Archie already swore off that place because Crystal dumped him."

Vinny let out a soft chuckle. "He should've known. She was way too pretty for him."

"He's not bad looking."

Vinny's eyes widened and he started coughing on the food in his mouth. I broke the promise I made to myself earlier and leaned over to pat him on the back.

"You think Archie is hot?" he asked, coughing once more.

"No, I said he's not bad looking."

"So you've never had a thing for him?" Vinny asked with a slight smirk. I shook my head. "Or Isaac or Logan?"

I couldn't stop the giggle from coming through my throat.

"I've never had a thing for any of my friends," I confirmed. "They're just not bad looking. I mean, maybe more than just 'not bad' but I never, like, *wanted* any of them."

"Who's more than 'not bad'?" Vinny wasn't even trying to hide his grin or amusement at the conversation.

I hesitated for a moment. "Fine, I guess I've always found Logan cute, but I *never* had a thing for him. *Ever* ."

Vinny let out an uncharacteristic giggle and laid himself back on the blanket.

"It's because he looks like me, right?" Vinny teased, tilting his head to look at me.

I playfully rolled my eyes. "Of course."

"Will you feed me a strawberry?" Vinny asked, sending me a look with his eyes that was impossible to resist.

I raised my eyebrows. "Will you choke on it lying back like that?" I plucked a strawberry out of the bowl.

"No, Dad."

I held the strawberry in front of his mouth and Vinny took a bite, watching me as he did so.

"See?" he said after he swallowed it.

Vinny sat up, bracing his arms behind him before I fed him the rest of the strawberry.

"Hey, how did you meet Thomas anyway?" I asked. The question had been in the back of my mind since I had found out they knew each other.

Vinny smirked. "Grindr."

My eyes immediately bulged at his answer.

"We didn't hook up though," he said, causing me to calm down. "We intended to I guess, but we just hung out and it never got that far. He gave

me my first cigarette and then always got me a pack whenever I asked."

"So I have him to thank for your nicotine addiction?"

Vinny let out a laugh and shrugged. "It's my fault. I don't get how he was working with you at camp this summer yet he was still here to give me cigarettes."

"We had two days off a week," I explained. "He managed to get Saturday and Sunday off every week and he drove home. It's only about an hour drive. I just never came home like he did."

Vinny nodded in understanding.

"You're not going to go get cigarettes from him anymore though, right?" I asked, my voice hopeful.

"Hey, I'm quitting," Vinny said. "I haven't smoked in..." He thought for a moment. "In four days. Not even after therapy Wednesday and that was rough."

"I know, Logan told me."

Those words seemed to change Vinny's mood in an instant. He immediately stiffened and narrowed his eyes at me.

"Logan... told you?"

"Well, yeah, he told me it was a rough session for you guys," I replied, treading lightly.

"And why would he tell you that?"

I couldn't tell why he was starting to feel so distant, so closed off and bitter.

"I don't know, Vin, I asked how it went."

"Logan shouldn't be telling you *anything* about therapy," Vinny hissed. "And you shouldn't be asking, Carson!"

"I only asked to make sure everything was okay," I told him in a soft voice. "Because I know you'd never say anything about it. I didn't ask for anything specific."

"Of course it's not okay!" Vinny exclaimed. "It's fucking therapy! We wouldn't be there if everything was okay!"

"Okay, Vinny, I didn't think it'd be such a big deal to just ask how it went," I replied.

I was getting irritated now. I hated when he did this, when he had such big reactions to things and I couldn't understand why.

"It's a big deal because it's none of your business," he hissed in a low tone. "It's private. Did you ever consider that I don't tell you because it's private and I don't want you to know?"

"You don't tell me *anything* !" I exclaimed, throwing my hands up. "And then you get mad at me because I do something that bothers you all because I don't *know* it's going to bother you because you don't tell me! You expect me just to know these things!"

He just shook his head at me with a tense jaw.

"I don't know if you know this about relationships, Vinny, but they only work when both people can communicate with each other," I said, taking a deep breath. "And I've tried to be so patient with you, but you leave me in the dark about so much and then get angry with me because I can't read your mind! If we both can't be open, then I don't know what we're even doing!"

Vinny didn't say a word. He just got up and stormed off.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you though of the chapter!

46

Vinny Taylor

The thing about not having anyone was that when I needed a place to escape to, I had nowhere to go. I was a fire that burned everything around me, a loaded gun that fired off shots to the people I was closest to. And it left me with nothing and no one.

I couldn't go home because I had gotten into it with my dad again about talking to the police. He didn't understand why I couldn't do it, why it would be more painful for me to do it. He couldn't understand and didn't even begin trying to. It was just another thing to cause a rift between us and I didn't want to go back there. I didn't want to fight with him about it again, didn't think I could handle it without having a breakdown.

And I couldn't go back to Carson. Not after speaking to him the way I did and what he said to me. I couldn't go back because I was afraid that if I did, he would end it between us right there. And I couldn't blame him for it. I deserved it for the way I treated him.

So with nowhere to go and no one to see, I walked myself down to the bus station and looked at the routes that would take me to the address I had memorized for all these years. It had been the return address I had seen on the birthday cards I had gotten every year until they eventually stopped. I couldn't remember why I had memorized it, but I knew I would never forget it. Though, I never had any intentions of actually going there, it still stuck in my brain like I was waiting for it to become useful.

I found the correct bus route and waited there until the bus came. The ride was only about thirty minutes and once I got off the bus, I plugged the address into the gps on my phone and saw that it was only a five minute walk from the bus station.

I passed through the town, passing by groups of friends laughing and filing in and out of the many restaurants that littered the town center. A few blocks down, I veered off to a side street, then down another until I reached the house I had been looking for.

It wasn't really what I expected, I supposed. It was a two-story house, larger than what I had imagined, with a two car garage and a porch perched on the front. The yard was well kept and there was a fence that blocked off the backyard, but from what I could see, the yard extended considerably.

I stared at the house for a few more moments and before I could stop myself, I walked through the front yard and up to the porch. I hesitated a moment before knocking on the door.

What the fuck am I doing? I thought.

I turned to leave the house, but before I could go, the door opened and revealed a woman that appeared to be in her late thirties or early forties. She was shorter than me by at least half a foot and she looked up at me with curiosity.

"Hi. Can I help you?" she asked, not opening the door all the way.

"Uh..." I trailed, turning to face her completely. "Uh, yeah. Is Robbie here?"

"Robbie..." she started, then her eyes widened and she looked at me with a certain familiarity. "You must be Vincent."

"Uh, yeah."

"Rob!" she yelled from the door way. She opened the door wider and motioned for me to come inside. "Come in, please." She smiled at me.

"Thanks..." I said, stepping over the threshold. I couldn't help but feel like this was a bad idea. Stepping into that house was like stepping into a different world, one I wasn't supposed to be part of.

"Rob!" she yelled again, shutting the door. "I'm Kristie, by the way, Rob's wife."

I had known Robbie had gotten married, but it still felt strange to hear someone refer to themselves as his wife.

I really shouldn't have come here. I hadn't mentally prepared myself to see Robbie. I just didn't think.

"Thanks, Kristie, but I should—"

I couldn't finish my thought before Robbie stepped into my view. I didn't even remember how old I was the last time I saw him. Maybe nine. Maybe ten. He looked the same, only sporting a few more gray hairs. He was more muscular now, wearing a fitted t-shirt that showed his broadened shoulders.

He shot me a look of confusion, but I could tell he recognized me instantly. I looked just like him, it wouldn't take a rocket scientist to put the pieces together.

"Vinny?" he asked, stopping in his tracks.

I could just walk out, rip open the door, go back to the bus station, and never turn back. But seeing him right in front of me brought up emotions I couldn't even comprehend, so I was frozen in my spot in front of the door.

"Yeah, that's me," I said in a bored tone.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, shaking his head as if trying to clear his vision and decide if he was imagining this.

"I wanted to see how your second chance life is going," I said, my tone low as my eyes narrowed in on him. "I've heard it's pretty good because Grandma won't fucking shut up about it."

Kristie gasped, but Robbie wasn't nearly as startled by my choice of words.

"She sent you here?"

"No, but she's been trying to for months."

I hated that I had done exactly what my grandmother wanted in the end. That woman always seemed to get what she wanted.

"I don't understand," Kristie interjected, standing between us. "I thought that you lived with Jeff?"

I glanced at her, a look of confusion on my face.

"I do," I told her.

"But he lives far, doesn't he?" she asked, looking toward her husband.

"If you consider thirty minutes down the highway far," I said and her expression immediately changed to one of anger as she looked at Robbie.

"You told me they lived too far for you to go see them," Kristie said in a low tone.

"Honey, we can talk about this later, please," Robbie pleaded, trying to touch her arm but she pulled away.

"I'll give you two some time to talk," she said before walking off and out of sight.

Robbie and I stood in silence for a moment. He was looking at me like he thought he was hallucinating. His eyes were squinting and then widening again. I finally snapped after I couldn't take more of the scrutiny.

"I'm not sorry about her finding out you lied to her," I told him and at my voice, he seemed to realize that what he was seeing was real.

"It's not your fault, anyway," he replied with a sigh. "It was just me thinking it was easier than telling the truth."

"And what's the truth?" I asked, willing my voice to stay even and unshaken. "That you failed as a father? That Jeff can't even stand the sight of you?"

"Exactly," he replied. "I failed, Jeff took you in, and the minute he adopted you, you were no longer mine. I had to respect the decisions he made regarding you."

"Okay, but he still let you see me," I pointed out. "And you eventually just stopped coming around."

I didn't know why I cared so much about this. I didn't care about Robbie. I didn't care that he stopped coming to see me. But it seemed like seeing him standing in front of me opened up a part of my mind that I had blocked out for years. A part that wanted answers. A part that wanted to know why he spent the last seven or eight years with his do over family without thinking about me once.

"It just seemed like the best decision at the time," he said. "To stop coming around. Kristie was pregnant with the twins, we were getting married."

"And you didn't want her to know about me," I finished for him and by the look on his face I could tell I was right.

He sighed, raking his hand through his hair and pulling at the end.

"It wasn't that I didn't want her knowing about you," Robbie told me. "I told her I had a son eventually. I just didn't want her trying to convince me to get you back like your grandmother does. I didn't want her coming around with me and maybe realizing what a failure of a father I was. And Jeff was more than happy with my decision to stay away. I told him I wouldn't bother you until you decided for yourself you wanted to see me."

"I don't even know why I'm here," I muttered, shaking my head.

"Why don't you come sit?" Robbie suggested, gesturing behind him to what I assumed was the kitchen. "You obviously came here for something."

"I came here because I had nowhere else to go," I retorted.

He stared at me silently for a moment then gestured for me to follow him. I hesitantly obliged, keeping my distance from him as he walked ahead of me

to the kitchen. Robbie gestured for me to sit then sat across from me after getting us each a glass of water.

"What do you mean you have nowhere else to go?" he finally asked after taking a sip of water. "Why can't you be at home? Does Jeff know where you are?"

"Of course, he doesn't," I responded and Robbie let out a sigh. "He's the reason I can't fucking go back there."

"What did he do?"

"You really messed him up, you know," I told him and his eyes widened. "You made him so anxious and paranoid about something happening to me. Now he *suffocates* me."

I hadn't even checked my phone since leaving, but I had felt it vibrating in my pocket numerous times. No doubt, Dad had been trying to call me since I wasn't home by the time I said I would be. He had probably started calling me as soon as I was a minute late.

"He just loves you, Vinny—"

"And I can't stand it!" I cut him off abruptly. "That's the problem. I can't stand people caring about me like that because I don't deserve it."

Robbie shook his head. "You remind me so much of me, Vinny. And that scares me."

I shot him a glare. "Don't fucking say that."

"It's true," he replied. "I was such a sad kid, Vinny, had the same attitude you have and it ruined me. I don't want that for you. And I know Jeff doesn't either."

I didn't say anything.

"Look, I'm not good at this," Robbie sighed, taking another sip of water.

"No shit."

"You can stay here," he said. "As long as you need to, but I'm not good at the whole talking thing."

I sighed. "Me neither."

We were both silent for a few moments, taking drinks of water and drumming our fingers on the table.

"So, you got a girlfriend?" he asked, obviously trying to alleviate some of the tension.

"I'm gay."

"Oh," he responded quickly. "You got a boyfriend then?"

"Probably not for long," I said, clenching my hand on the table into a fist. "Because I ruin every moment we have together."

"I'm sure it's not all you."

"No, it is," I told him. "Carson's perfect in every way and I'm fucking destroying him with the way I treat him."

I didn't know why I was confiding in him. Maybe it was the comfort of knowing there was no possible way he could judge me. With anything I had done, he had done worse. He had no right to judge me and we both knew that.

"Carson?" Robbie asked, a look of familiarity on his face. "Is that the same Carson that's friends with Logan?"

"The very same one."

"Wow. They still friends?"

"Yeah."

The two of us were interrupted by the sounds of hushed whispers that were much louder than intended.

"Kids!" Robbie exclaimed. "Go back up to bed!"

I turned around in my seat to see a young boy and girl in pajamas in the kitchen doorway.

"Who is that?" the little girl asked. It was sad that I didn't even know my little half-siblings names.

The little boy that stood beside her looked almost exactly like me as a child, except with eyes that took after his mother.

"He's your cousin," Robbie answered and I immediately shot a look at him. "Now go up to bed, you can see him tomorrow."

"But—"

"Now, Bailey."

Kristie came into view a moment later.

"Bailey and Oliver, upstairs," she said, sending me an apologetic look before bringing the kids away with her.

"You lie to them too?" I asked Robbie as soon as they were gone.

"It is too much to explain to them right now when they're supposed to be sleeping," Robbie explained.

"What are they, like seven?"

"Just turned eight."

"I think they can understand the concept of a half-brother."

Robbie rolled his eyes. "That's not the confusing part. The confusing part is explaining to them why they've never met you and why you live with Jeff."

I shrugged.

"Speaking of Jeff," Robbie started. "You need to call him and tell him where you are and if you're staying the night."

"I'm not fucking calling him," I denied.

Robbie sighed, running his hand down his face before pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"Are you staying the night?"

"Yes."

"He's not going to answer me."

I rolled my eyes and pulled my own phone out of my pocket. I had about thirty missed calls from Dad, Mom, Logan, and Carson. I made a mental note to text Logan back after.

"Call him on my phone," I said, handing it over. "He'll answer on the first ring."

"Are you fucking serious?" Robbie asked, looking at the phone in my hand. I just raised my eyebrows at him and gestured for him to take the phone.

Robbie sighed and took the phone from me, tapping on Jeff's name to call him. He answered almost immediately.

"Uh, Jeff, it's Robbie," he said, sending me a look of discomfort. I took a sip of my water, watching as he spoke.

"Vinny's here," Robbie said. "How did you get here?" he asked me.

"Bus," I said.

"He took a bus," Robbie reiterated. "He says he wants to stay the night. I can drive him back in the morning."

Robbie listened for a moment. I could hear the muffled sound of my dad's voice over the phone.

"He wants to talk to you," Robbie told me after a moment.

"Fuck no," I instantly denied, crossing my arms over my chest.

"He said fuck no," Robbie told him. "His words not mine."

Robbie listened again then directed his next words at me.

"He said either you talk to him now or he's coming here tonight."

I rolled my eyes and grabbed the phone from Robbie.

"Hello?"

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Dad seethed. I could tell he was trying to keep his voice down, but his temper was starting to get the best of him. "Do you have any fucking *idea* what I've gone through in the last few hours having no clue where you were?"

I didn't even think about that and I couldn't say that to him. It would only make him more angry.

"Well, now you know," I muttered, looking down at the table.

"Carson came here without you, telling us you walked off and he tried to find you but couldn't."

My heart ached at the thought of Carson driving around town, going to the park and finding our tree empty.

"And then you didn't answer your phone and I had no idea of knowing where you were or who you were with."

"Dad, I know, you can yell at me about it tomorrow," I said with a sigh. "I just needed to get away."

"From Carson?"

"From all of you!"

He was silent for a moment and I would have thought he hung up if it wasn't for the sound of his heavy breathing.

"You can stay there for the night and Robbie can drive you home tomorrow, but after that you're in big fucking trouble," he said in a low tone. "And going to Robbie's? You know how I feel—"

"This has nothing to do with how *you* feel," I snapped. "You can't make that choice for me anymore. Coming here was *my* choice and if I ever come here again it's going to be my choice."

"Fine," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I hung up without another word and looked up to see Robbie staring at me.

I let out a heavy sigh, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my hands.

"I need a fucking smoke," I muttered.

"You smoke?" Robbie asked. "Aren't you like sixteen?"

I glared at him. "I'm going to be eighteen in two months."

"Oh right," he said, clearing his throat. "Well, let's go up to the guest room. There's a balcony up there and we can have a smoke."

"You smoke?" I mimicked him. Robbie stood up and at followed after him. "Trading heroin for nicotine?"

If Robbie took offense to that, he didn't let it show. He just laughed, shooting me a grin as he led me up the stairs.

"Nicotine's one of the only socially acceptable addictions," he said, opening the door to a bedroom in the upstairs hall. "Heroin not so much."

The room we entered was clean and bare of any decorations. There was a queen sized bed with blue sheets pushed into the corner of the room opposite the glass doors leading out to the balcony.

"You don't sleep in the room with the balcony?" I asked as he opened the doors.

"The master has a bathroom and a walk in closet," Robbie explained. "But I come out here a lot."

"When you don't want your wife to know you're smoking?"

"Exactly."

Robbie pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and took two out. I stared at the one he offered me.

"I haven't smoked in four days," I said. "I've been trying to quit."

"Then maybe I shouldn't give you one," he replied.

We stared at each other for a few moments, but I ultimately took the cigarette from his hand and put it in my mouth. He offered me the lighter after he lit his and I copied his actions, choking on the smoke when I inhaled.

"You smoke menthols?" I asked, coughing through the words. "That's fucking disgusting."

Robbie chuckled, blowing smoke out through his nose.

"Come to think of it, I probably shouldn't have given you a menthol."

"I thought these were illegal now."

He nodded, taking another drag. "I stocked up before they stopped selling them."

We silently smoked together, leaning against the railing on the balcony.

"So," Robbie started. "I know you said you don't know why you're here, but why come to my house of all places?"

I pondered on the question. Because no one would look for me here. Because he was the one person in the world who had no business judging me.

"Because no one would know I came here," I finally said. "And being there... it was all becoming too much. My family, Carson, they're all just watching me and hoping I don't fall apart."

"And I can't do that," he said. "I know next to nothing about you, I can't judge you."

I nodded, looking down up at the night sky.

"You can't judge me because you don't know me and you have no right to," I explained.

He nodded in agreement, both of us taking another drag from our cigarettes.

"And I guess I had been suppressing any need to face you," I continued. "And then it finally broke through in my mind."

"Well, I'm glad you're here," he said. "Even if it's not under the best circumstances."

"Have you really been telling Grandma you want to see me?" I asked, turning to face him. "That you want me to come live with you?"

Robbie's eyes widened. "That's her idea, not mine. I told her I wouldn't mind getting to know you, that's it. It's her that thinks that you should be with me."

I let out a relieved sigh.

"I wouldn't say no if you needed a place to stay," he went on. "But I know Jeff and Val are your parents."

Robbie hesitated for a moment, then continued.

"Your grandmother doesn't understand that relinquishing my parental rights and letting Jeff and Val adopt you was *my* decision and the best thing I could've done for you," he said, flicking ash off his cigarette. "She thinks Jeff coerced me, even though I tell her that's not true."

He looked at me with sad eyes.

"I couldn't take care of you. She thought you were going to be with Jeff temporarily until I got my shit together," he said. "It took *years* for me to get clean. There was a time I was sober for almost four years and relapsed again. I couldn't put you through that. I wouldn't take you back only to have to send you off to Jeff again every time I relapsed."

"So she thinks he forced you," I said, taking another hit from my cigarette.

"She thinks he took advantage of me when I was vulnerable," Robbie replied. "Which isn't true. Jeff and I made that decision together. It was the best option."

"I'm just happy you didn't send me off to Grandma."

Robbie let out a loud laugh. "I may have been a bad father, but I would never do that to you."

I smiled over at him, even surprising myself at the gesture.

"In all seriousness," Robbie continued. "Jeff and I used to be really close. He's the only one I'd want to take care of you. My sisters are psycho and so is my
mother. Jeff is a good man who married a good woman and loved you like his own even before he took you in."

"Grandma thinks I wouldn't be the way I am if I lived with you," I told him and he shook his head.

"I don't know what you're going through, but I know the answer to your problems isn't moving in with some guy your barely know."

"I have issues," I started. "I go to therapy, she doesn't like that I'm gay."

Robbie snorted and stubbed his cigarette out in the ash tray.

"She thinks you wouldn't be gay if you lived with me?"

"Apparently."

He let out another loud laugh and the two of us sat down on the chairs behind us after I finished my own cigarette.

"She thinks she knows the answers to everything," Robbie said, glancing over at me.

"She doesn't even know anything about me," I said, frustration in my tone. "She has no idea why I am the way I am. She thinks Dad's *crazy* for putting me in therapy, but she doesn't even know why I might need it."

"You just can't let her get to you," Robbie replied. "She's an old woman who knows nothing and thinks she knows everything. Don't let her words weigh on you. They mean nothing."

I was surprised by the way he spoke about his mother. From the way Grandma spoke, it seemed like she and Robbie were so close. The reality of it was that he just smiled and nodded at whatever she said. He was the favorite between he and Jeff because he didn't challenge her. He just made he think he agreed with everything he said whether he did or not. My family, on the other hand, always gave her a hard time. It was no wonder why she basically hated us.

"And going to therapy doesn't make you crazy," Robbie continued with a sincere look. "I've gone to plenty of therapy sessions being in and out of rehab. My wife is a psychiatrist. Therapy is a good thing."

"You don't have to sit out here and talk to me," I told him. It suddenly felt like he was talking to me like he was trying to talk me off a ledge. I didn't want his pity.

"Vinny, there's not a day that goes by I don't think about you," Robbie answered and there was a sudden squeezing in my chest at the words. "Trust me, I'm loving this. I'll sit out here all night if you want to."

"We talked about the day Dad took me in on therapy the other day," I said. Robbie's expression hardened. "About Dad breaking into the house, the glass..."

"I hate myself for that," Robbie replied. He let out a deep breath. "I don't even remember it happening. But I remember Jeff screaming at me in the hospital and how he told me you needed stitches."

So he didn't remember. And I didn't remember. Dad was the only one with those memories etched into his brain. The only one with the trauma from that day.

"I'm going to go to bed." I said, standing from the chair. "You're going to drive me home tomorrow?"

Robbie stood up after me. "Yeah, I'll drive you."

I nodded and walked back into the bedroom, Robbie following behind me. As soon as he was out of the room, I ripped my shirt, pants, socks, and shoes off.

I plopped down onto the bed and stared at the ceiling before falling into the deepest sleep I'd had in a while.

**

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading!

Did you expect Vinny to go to Robbie's? What do you think about Robbie? Let me know what you thought of the chapter!

47

Vinny Taylor

I woke to the strange feeling of someone watching me.

I turned over into my back and rubbed my eyes before turning to face to little kids staring at me from the side of the bed. A startled noise escaped from my throat and I jumped back at the sight of them.

"You're our cousin that lives with Uncle Jeff?" the girl, Bailey, asked.

"Uh..." I glanced over at the clock. It was after nine. I never slept in this late.

"What are you doing here?" the boy, Oliver, asked before I had a chance to say anything.

"We've never met Uncle Jeff," Bailey continued. "Dad says he lives far away."

"Um. Kind of," I replied.

I didn't want to be the one to explain to them their father had been lying to them their entire lives. That one was on Robbie.

"Bailey and Oliver, I told you two to let Vinny sleep!" Kristie said, coming in through the open bedroom door.

I cleared my throat, sitting up in the bed.

"It's fine, Kristie," I told her, the two kids still staring at me. "I, uh, I usually get up earlier than this."

"You must be like Rob, getting up at the crack of dawn every day," she said, gesturing toward the kids to leave the room.

"It's a family thing."

"Kids, go downstairs. Dad is cooking you breakfast," she demanded. "You can see Vinny when he's ready to get up."

The kids reluctantly listened to their mother and left the room, not without turning around to stare at me from the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Vinny," Kristie said in a soft tone. "I told them to let you sleep, but they were so curious about you."

"It's fine," I told her again. "Do you have an extra toothbrush I could borrow?"

She nodded. "The bathroom is across the hall. I'll leave it out for you on the sink."

I thanked her and she left the room, closing the door behind her. Once she was gone, I got up from the bed and pulled on my clothes from the night before. I sighed as I pulled Carson's shirt on over my body and shrugged on his jacket before going to the bathroom and brushing my teeth.

The smell of pancakes filled the entirety of the downstairs of the house as I made my way there. When I walked into the kitchen, Bailey and Oliver were sitting beside each other, facing the kitchen doorway. Robbie stood at the stove, a pile of pancakes on a plate beside him on the counter. When I entered the room, he turned to look at me.

"Sleep okay?" he asked.

I nodded, sitting down across from Oliver, the same seat I was in last night.

"I slept fine," I said. I had slept better in Robbie's guest room than I could in my own bed. "You got coffee?"

Robbie gestured toward the pot on the counter near the sink before reaching into the cabinet above him and taking out a mug. He handed it to me as I walked by and I poured myself a cup of coffee.

"Cream is in the fridge door, sugar is next to the fridge," Robbie told me.

This whole experience felt too strange. Never in my life had I ever thought I would be casually in Robbie's kitchen, drinking his coffee, eating his food, sitting with his kids. It was too weird. I didn't fit there.

After opening up to him so much last night, I didn't even want to see Robbie. I wanted to go home to my family, to my dad, as soon as possible.

I sat back down at the table and Robbie brought over plates for each of us. I did my best not to look at the kids, but the both of them wouldn't take their eyes off of me.

"Why are your kids looking at me like that?" I asked Robbie as he sat down beside me.

"Stop staring," he snapped at them. "Do you want him to stare at you like that?"

"You're our cousin?" Bailey asked me. Her hair was done in two low buns and she twirled her finger in a loose curl that hung at the side of her face.

"Um, something like that," I replied as she stuck her fork in one of the pancakes on the plate in front of us and plopped it down on her own.

"Something like that?" she asked. Oliver just continued staring at me while his sister got him a pancake of his own.

"Stop questioning him," Robbie demanded, grabbing food for himself. "We'll talk later. Vinny, eat."

I hadn't even realized I was the only one with an empty plate. Kristie had made her way to the kitchen and piled pancakes on her plate, sitting down beside Bailey.

"We're gonna talk about him while he's not here?" Bailey questioned her father.

Robbie shot her a stern look as he placed a pancake on my plate.

"There's some things I have to explain to you *later* ."

"So you wanna talk behind his back?"

"Let's just talk now," I interjected, everyone's eyes turning to me. "This is awkward as fu— hell."

Kristie shot me a grateful look for catching myself before swearing.

"Fine," Robbie said, letting out a heavy sigh. "We can talk now."

Bailey didn't hesitate to ask questions as soon as the words left his mouth.

"Why have we never met you? Why are you here? Where do you live? What—"

"Bailey, sweetie," Robbie stopped her, glancing over at me as my eyes widened at the little girl. "Let me explain and you can save questions for the end, okay?"

Bailey and Oliver both nodded in agreement and continued eating their breakfast. Robbie hesitated for a moment, looking to be gathering his thoughts, before he continued.

"Vinny is your cousin because he was adopted by your Uncle Jeff," Robbie started slowly, gauging the reactions of the kids. They just waited, willing him to continue. "But before you were born and before I met your mom, I had a girlfriend and the two of us had a baby, which is Vinny."

"So you gave him to Uncle Jeff?" Bailey asked, Oliver looking confused beside her.

"No, I didn't *give* him to Uncle Jeff," Robbie answered. "Uncle Jeff adopted him because I couldn't take care of him. I was... sick. Vinny's mom passed away, so I had to take care of him by myself and I couldn't, so Uncle Jeff brought him into his family and raised him."

"So Vinny's our brother?" Bailey asked, looking straight at me.

Robbie sighed. "He's your half-brother technically. Because he has my genes. But Uncle Jeff is his dad because he took Vinny into his family when he was young and raised him."

"Vinny is half our brother...?" Oliver asked, looking even more confused.

"Half-brother, Oliver," Bailey told him. "We have one parent the same. So you call Uncle Jeff dad?" Her question was directed at me.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah. I call your Uncle Jeff, Dad, because he's my dad."

"But our dad is also your dad, so you have two dads," Bailey continued.

"Technically, I guess," I replied, drumming my fingers on the table. "Look at it this way, your dad is my father because him and my mother had me together, but Uncle Jeff is my dad because he raised me and I've lived with him my whole life."

"Okay," Bailey said with a shrug. "So do you call us cousins or your brother and sister?"

I thought about it for a moment. I had never actually thought of them as anything to me, just Robbie's kids, but I couldn't tell her that.

"What do you want me to call you?" I asked them.

Bailey and Oliver looked at each other and seemed to have a silent conversation before both of them looked back at me.

"We want you to be our brother," Bailey spoke for the both of them.

I nearly grimaced at her words, but I kept my face impassive. I didn't know whether I would show my face here again. I didn't want to get their hopes up and then be a disappointment. I already disappointed enough people.

"Okay," I said slowly. "Then you can call me your brother and I'll call you my brother and sister."

Bailey and Oliver looked at each other happily before finishing off the last of their breakfast. I slowly ate my pancake, and by the time I was done, I was really ready to leave and face the wrath of my father at home.

Kristie and Robbie cleared the table and brought the dishes over to the sink. I awkwardly stood from my chair, standing behind it while the kids sat and stared at me. After a moment, Bailey and Oliver stood from their chairs and walked over to me.

"Can we give you a hug, Vinny?" Bailey asked, Oliver standing on the other side of me.

"Uh, sure kid," I replied and the two of them instantly had their arms around me. I struggled for a moment to free my arms that were pinned to my sides by the two kids. Ultimately, I got them free and put an arm around each of them.

"You'll come visit again, right?" Oliver asked me, loosening his grip.

I didn't want to lie to these kids or give them empty promises, but it was hard to say no when they both looked at me like that was the only thing they wanted in the world. Looking down at Oliver was like looking at a younger version of myself and I couldn't stand the thought of seeing him disappointed.

"I don't know," I told them. "Maybe."

They were not fully satisfied with that answer, but they didn't argue or look at me with sadness.

Robbie walked back into the room and stopped short when he saw the three of us embracing.

"Kids, stop trying to hold Vinny hostage," Robbie said, coming over to us. They reluctantly let go of me but didn't step away.

"Can we go with you to bring him home?" Bailey asked.

Robbie glanced over at me then shook his head.

"Why, Dad, *why* ?" Bailey whined.

"Because I said so," he said and I couldn't keep myself from rolling my eyes. "Now, say goodbye."

Bailey and Oliver hugged me once more and muttered their goodbyes. I said bye to Kristie before following Robbie out of the house and into his car.

"They could've come," I told him once we were both in the car.

Robbie shook his head. "I don't know how Jeff's going to react to seeing me."

"He wouldn't have freaked out in front of the kids." I felt compelled to defend my father against Robbie. Despite all I said and revealed the night before in my vulnerable state, I didn't want Robbie passing judgement on him.

Robbie just shrugged and pulled out of the driveway, heading toward the highway.

"You know where you're going?" I asked.

"I know where you live," he said. "Unless you moved and your grandmother *didn't* tell me about it which I find unlikely."

"Speaking of Grandma," I started, taking a deep breath. "Don't tell her I came to see you. I'll never hear the fucking end of it."

He was silent for a moment. "I won't tell her. I'll tell the kids to keep quiet about it."

I nodded and looked out the window.

"Thanks for being so good with the kids," Robbie spoke up after a few moments. "I know it was awkward, but they were so excited to see you."

"I don't want to get their hopes up because I don't know if..." I trailed.

"I know," he said. "But you're welcome over any time. If you want."

"You don't have to drop me off at home," I said as we exited the highway. "You can drop me at the park, I'll walk."

Robbie glanced at me, raising an eyebrow. "I'm not dropping you off at the park."

I sighed, leaning my head against the window.

Soon enough, we were pulling into the driveway behind my car. We just sat there for a moment in silence. Robbie pulled a napkin and a pen out of the glove compartment and wrote something on it before handing it to me.

"My phone number," he said. "Use it if you want. Throw it away if you want. But now you have it."

I looked down at the napkin and nodded before stuffing it into my pocket. A moment later, Dad was walking out of the house and toward the car. I got out of the car before he reached it and he looked me up and down like he was expecting something to be wrong or out of place.

Robbie got out of the car and stood in front of his brother. The two were about the same height, Robbie being slightly taller, but they looked almost identical, Dad being a little older. It was no wonder people who didn't know us didn't question whether I was actually Jeff's son; he and Robbie could be twins.

"Thank you for bringing him home," Dad said through gritted teeth.

Robbie nodded. "It was no problem." He looked over at me. "Maybe, I'll hear from you Vinny."

"Maybe," I said.

"Vin, can you go inside?" Dad asked, though it felt more like a command. Not wanting to argue with him, I stepped away and up to the house while the two of them spoke in hushed voices.

Mom and Logan were instantly in front of me when I walked in. Mom was doing her best to look angry, but she could never hold that look with me, so her face melted into an expression of relief as she took me into her arms.

"You scared me," she mumbled into my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Ma," I said, looking behind her at Logan who had his arms crossed over his chest with a stern expression on his face.

Dad walked back into the house a moment later and when I looked out the window, Robbie had already driven off.

Mom let go of me when she saw Dad.

"I think you two need to talk," she said, gesturing for Logan to follow her out of the room.

Dad and I just stared at each other for a moment before I broke. I threw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his waist and burying my head into his shoulder as tears leaked from my eyes. He instantly put his arms around me, steadying us after I caused him to stumble.

"I'm so mad at you," he said, holding me tighter.

"I'm so tired," I cried, a sob ripping through my throat.

He paused for a moment, then started rubbing comforting circles on my back.

"I know," he said, his voice soft, tender. "I wish I could take all your pain away, but I can't."

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the tears to stop. My hands gripped the back of Dad's shirt as the tears continued to leak out.

I didn't know how long we stood there, but eventually, Dad moved us to the couch and sat down with his arm around me, me leaning into his side. He didn't say anything until I had calmed down.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I don't know what that was," I said with a shaky breath. "I thought about a lot last night, opened up more than I wanted to, and it all just came back to me then."

"Robbie said you two had a good conversation last night."

"I guess."

"You opened up to him?" he asked. I didn't want to look at his face to see if he looked hurt by that.

"It was easier to talk to him," I admitted, wiping my eyes. "I don't even know him, he doesn't expect anything from me. We don't owe each other anything."

"And you feel like you owe us? Me?"

I let out a humorless laugh. "I owe you a lot."

"All you owe me is honesty."

I didn't respond to that.

"I'm going to start going to solo sessions with one of Dr. Brown's colleagues," Dad told me. "I already spoke with her about it."

I lifted my head from his shoulder and looked at him with wide eyes.

"She was happy I brought it up, actually," he said with a laugh. "I think it'll be good for me. I have some things I need to work through..."

"Yeah, I think it's a good idea," I agreed.

Dad nodded. "I don't even know how to give you consequences for running off last night."

"I don't know," I said. "Ground me."

"I don't like the idea of... forcing you to stay at the house or in your room when you don't want to be in there."

He was still so upset over the fact that what happened to me, happened in the house. It was like that was the part that bothered him the most, besides what had happened.

"I talked to Logan," Dad continued. "And if you want to switch rooms, you can. I know it's kinda late for that, but if you want."

"I don't think it matters anymore," I admitted. "I don't think it would help."

I had been staying in that room for months since what happened. Logan's room was exactly like mine but across the hall. It didn't feel like it would matter much at all. I would still be in this house. I would still be afraid of someone coming in.

"Okay," he said, letting out a heavy breath. "And about going to the police..."

"Dad," I groaned.

"Hear me out," he said. "We can wait. I think it might benefit us to talk to Dr. Brown about it first. Then from there we can make a decision, maybe talk to a lawyer and see what can actually be done."

I hesitated. My first reaction was to blow up at him again, tell him he wasn't listening to me. But I was already so emotionally spent. And I saw this for what it was. He was trying. This was his compromise.

"Okay," I said.

Dad squeezed my shoulder in response.

"You should probably call Carson," he said. "Tell him you're home. He was pretty worried about you last night."

This was the part I was dreading the most. Having to face Carson. But there was no use in delaying the inevitable.

"He deserves better," I said in a soft voice.

"He deserves for you to be honest and open with him and treat him right," Dad replied. "You can't shut him out. You can't run away when you get uncomfortable."

I took a few deep breaths.

Dad patted my leg before standing up. "Call him."

I pulled out my phone as Dad walked out of the room, and sent a text to Carson.

To: Carson

i'm home. can you come over

He took a few minutes to answer and I spent every one of them staring down at my phone, willing his text to come through faster.

From: Carson

i'll be there in ten

And so I sat on the couch, anxiously waiting for Carson to arrive.

***

Carson Hughes

I sat in my car outside Vinny's house for about five minutes before I forced myself to go inside. If I waited any longer, I might have just ended up driving home. But part of me worried that once I did go inside, I wouldn't be able to follow through with what I needed to do.

Vinny opened the door for me as soon as I knocked. Seeing him made me want to just take him into my arms and kiss him, but I couldn't.

Last night had put our relationship into perspective. The way Vinny blew up at me and left without trace. He was dealing with something much more complicated than I could comprehend and the added stress of trying to keep me happy wasn't helping. He had to look out for himself.

I had to look out for myself. The way he made me feel last night, the way he made me feel every time something like that happened, it wasn't the way a boyfriend should make their boyfriend feel. And then I had to worry about him for hours until Logan had told me he went to Robbie's

"Carson," Vinny said, his tone soft. "Come in."

He moved aside for me to get in the house, then motioned for me to follow him upstairs. We got up to his bedroom and Vinny closed the door behind us before he started talking.

"Carson, I'm sorry," he said in a sincere tone, his eyes wide and glossy. "I freaked out yesterday and walked away and that wasn't fair to you. I went to Robbie's—"

"I know, Logan told me," I said the words that had turned our redo date into another fight.

"Oh," he said. "Well, I was there. Me and him talked and it was... fine."

"That's good, Vinny." And I meant what I said, but I could tell from the look on his face that he didn't think I did.

"So, um, about last night," he continued. "It was really wrong of me to freak out on you like that and then leave. I was being too emotional and I'm working on that, I really am, but you don't deserve to be treated like that."

"I know, Vinny, I know you're working on it," I replied. I stood close to the door while he stood over near his bed, neither of us making the move to go closer to the other.

"Okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "I should tell you—"

"Vinny, wait," I stopped him.

I couldn't let this continue any longer or let him make excuses and ask me to stay because I wasn't certain I would have been able to say no to him if he went on. If he laid it all out for me and opened up right there, I didn't think I would have been able to walk away and I had already told myself that this was what was best for me. I needed to follow through with it or I would just end up hurting the both of us more.

"I need to say this," I told him and he nodded, willing me to go on. "I can't do this anymore."

"This...?"

"I can't be with you anymore."

Now that the words were out, there was no taking them back. Vinny stared at me, though he didn't look surprised.

"I tried to be so patient for you," I said, my voice shaking. "And I want to stay with you, I want to be with you so badly you have no idea. But it's just not *working* ."

He stayed silent, so I went on.

"We both end up hurt every time something like that happens and if you're not ready to be more open that's fine, but I can't be in a relationship with you right now."

I should have stopped there. I didn't want to hurt him any more than I already was, but my mind was reeling and my mouth kept moving.

"And I don't want to act like I know what's best for you because I don't," I continued, my voice breaking slightly. "But I know it's best for me to end this because I keep getting hurt."

Vinny let out a shuddered breath and I could tell he was trying to hold in his emotions.

"I'm not saying it has to be forever. We can still be friends and maybe when you're in a better place..."

"Friends?" he whispered. "Carson, just let me explain something to you."

"No!" I exclaimed, surprising the both of us at the loudness of my voice. "I can't hear any explanations or excuses right now, okay?"

He pressed his lips in a thin line. "Okay."

"I... God, Vinny," I said, shaking my head as I pulled at my hair. "I love you so much and this hurts so bad."

His eyes narrowed. I could feel stinging in my own eyes, my heart squeezing in my chest. I wanted to hug him, to kiss him, but I had to keep my distance. If I touched him, it would lure me back in. For my own mental health, I needed to walk away.

Vinny crossed his arms over his chest like they were the armor protecting his heart.

"Vinny, I'm sorry."

"You should go," he said, his voice thick and his jaw clenched.

"Vinny—"

"It's fine, Carson," he cut me off. "I understand, but I need you to go."

"Okay," I said, turning toward the door. "I'm sorry."

He just nodded as I left the room and closed the door behind me.

I thought breaking up with Vinny would give me some sort of relief, but it didn't. My heart was aching with each beat. My eyes watered and all I wanted was to get out of that house before I started crying. But of course I had to bump into Logan on my way out.

"Everything okay?" he asked, eyeing me with concern.

I shook my head. "I broke up with him."

Logan's eyes widened. "Oh fuck," he said. "This sucks."

"I just... I had to."

Logan's expression was sympathetic.

"I, um," Logan started. "I hate that I have to choose between the two of you for who I go comfort, but..." His eyes darted toward the stairs.

"Go to Vinny," I said. "It's fine."

"I'll call you later," Logan said before jogging up the stairs.

And I didn't let a tear fall until I was driving home.

***

Vinny Taylor

"Get out, Logan," I snapped as I lay in bed on my side, facing the window. I could tell it was Logan just by how he walked, how his steps fell.

I didn't want him to see me cry over Carson. It seemed different somehow than all the other times he had seen me cry. This time it was because of his best friend. This was because of something as superficial as a break up. But nothing about this felt superficial.

"Carson told me what happened," he said, shutting my door and coming to sit on the bed beside me.

"Great," I replied. "Now get out." My voice was thick with the sound of my cries.

"Vin," he said in a soft voice, placing his hand on my shoulder. I didn't move to shake his hand off, and he took that as a good sign. I just didn't have the energy.

"I was about to tell him about... you know." I sniffled, tears pooling in my eyes. "But it wouldn't have made a difference. It probably would have made

it worse."

"I think this is hurting him just as much as it's hurting you," Logan told me, pulling my shoulder back to turn me onto my back.

"That doesn't make me feel any better," I said. "I don't want him to be hurt."

Logan shifted and lay down beside me so that our shoulders were touching. The both of us stared up at the ceiling.

"I wish I never hurt him," I said with a cry. "I never wanted to."

"I know," Logan said. "But he has to do what's best for him. You need to do what's best for you."

And what was best for me? Probably not letting this destroy me. Not letting this set me backwards to where I had been a few months ago. Because if I just let myself fall back, what was the point of all this pain?

Logan and I stayed like that in my bed as I cried. He didn't speak, neither did I, but he stayed like he had promised me before that he would.

I would let myself cry for now, but to keep myself from falling again, I had to keep moving forward.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Let me know what you thought of the chapter :)

48

Carson Hughes

I barely remembered the ride home, my thoughts swimming through my brain and making it too hard to focus on one thing. But I ended up in my driveway anyway. From the time I left the house earlier to now, Mom had made her way home from work. It wouldn't surprise me if she had already fallen asleep.

I slowly opened the front door and tiptoed into the house, expecting to find Mom asleep on the couch.

"Hey baby," she greeted me, coming out of the kitchen.

"Hey," I replied, my tone bland and quiet.

Her face fell, like she instantly knew something was wrong with me.

"What's going on?" she asked. "Don't say nothing. I see the look on your face. I know it's not nothing."

"I broke up with Vinny."

"Oh, honey," she said, taking me into her arms as tears formed in my eyes. "It's okay."

"It doesn't feel okay," I sniffled. I had to bend down awkwardly to be able to press my head against her shoulder. She placed one hand on the back of my head, stroking my hair.

"It'll hurt for now," she said. "But you'll become stronger from this."

"I just... I feel like I let him down," I cried. "His dad, his brother, they were so against us at the beginning and I just proved them right."

"No," Mom denied, rubbing my back. "If this relationship wasn't working for you, then you did the right thing. Vinny might be disappointed but he cares about you, so he will understand."

"The thing is he's *not* disappointed in me, he blames himself," I said, letting out a shuddered breath. "And I don't blame him for anything."

What Vinny was going through was beyond me, and it was beyond him too. He didn't always know how to manage his emotions and I truly believed he was working on it, but it was too much for me to stay. I couldn't stay with him while he worked on it and I thought maybe our relationship made it worse for him, added more pressure for him to do better.

"I love him, Mom," I admitted in a whisper.

"I know, sweetie," she cooed in a comforting tone. "But I'm proud of you for knowing when you need to walk away. I wish I knew that at your age. Would've saved me a lot of heartache."

I didn't think any heartache could be worse than what I was feeling right now.

"How about we watch a movie?" Mom asked, pulling her phone out. "I'm just going to call Paul and let him know I'm not going to make it over."

"No, Mom," I groaned. "Don't cancel on Paul for me."

"Carson," she said in a stern tone. "I'm staying home with you whether you like it or not. Paul will understand. I'm sure he's had to comfort Spencer through some heartache."

Yeah, and probably heartache from the same person too.

"We're going to stay here. I'm going to order some pizza for lunch and we're going to watch funny movies," Mom said, standing from the couch. "I'll be right back.

We did everything Mom said we would for the rest of the day. The two of us had gotten through two and a half movies before she fell asleep on the

couch beside me. When I noticed her sleeping, I shut the TV off and cleaned up the pizza boxes from the table, putting the leftovers in the fridge.

The last few hours with her had taken the pressure off my heart. I felt lighter, though still saddened.

The next morning, Mom had made me a big breakfast and the two of us ate all of it. Later on in the afternoon, she had to go to work for the night.

"Are you sure you're okay by yourself?" she asked. "Why don't you invite your friends over?"

And no sooner than the words had left her mouth, my phone lit up with a cal from Logan. I excused myself to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Hey, man, how you feeling?" he asked. "Sorry I didn't call last night. I was with Vin the whole time."

"It's fine," I told him. I was busy with Mom anyway. "What's up?"

"Me and Dana are trying to get everyone together," he said. "Seems like it's been a while since it's been just all of us and we wanna talk about something."

"About what?"

He was silent for a moment. "Just... something. You'll see when you get here."

"Here as in your house?" I asked. "Logan, I don't think that's a good idea for me to go there."

"You two won't even have to see—"

"Why don't you guys just come here?" I suggested. "My mom's working tonight. We'll have the house to ourselves."

"Okay, sure."

And with that, we said our goodbyes, Logan promising they would be over later.

***

Vinny Taylor

I woke up the next morning to Logan getting up from the bed. We had fallen asleep side by side the night before. He had gotten up and talked to our parents, giving me some time alone, but he came back at night. It was comforting having him there. It reminded me of when we were kids, having sleepovers in each other's rooms at a time when life was simpler and we were closer.

Logan didn't notice I had woken before he left the room, gently shutting the door behind him.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes before looking over at the clock. It was just after seven, a time I was used to waking up at.

My mind immediately went back to the day before, to Carson and the sadness in his voice, the urge to get him out of my room before he saw me cry. But then I also remembered the promise I made to myself. The promise to not let this break me.

And with that reminder, I got out of bed and put on my running clothes. After brushing my teeth and wetting my hair, I went downstairs and called for Luna. My parents and Logan were already down there, each with a cup of coffee in their hands in the kitchen, looking surprised to see me as I entered.

"I'm going to take Luna for a run," I told them, grabbing myself and Luna some water. She came running into the room when she heard me call her name, her nails clicking on the floor.

"You're... going for a run?" Dad asked, placing his cup down on the counter.

"That's what I just said."

"Are you feeling okay?" Dad asked, stepping closer to me as I put Luna's harness on and attached her leash. "We heard about yesterday, about Carson."

"I'm fine," I casually replied. And I actually felt like I meant it.

"Are you sure—"

"Dad, I'm trying this new thing where I don't act like every time something bad happens, it's the end of the world," I cut him off.

He looked surprised, losing the next words on his tongue.

"Well," he stated, clearing his throat. "That's, uh, that's good."

"Are you going to eat something before you go, honey?" Mom asked.

I looked at her for a moment. She seemed like she was trying her hardest to hide her concern for me, but I still saw it. So I nodded and walked over to her by the cabinet.

"I probably should," I said and she smiled at me.

After quickly toasting a bagel and slathering some peanut butter on top, I ate the food as I walked out of the house. Once I finished, Luna and I ran out of the neighborhood and toward the park.

I was always afraid to tire Luna out too quickly, so I slowed my pace down to a light jog and she happily trotted beside me. She loved these runs as much as I did. The dog had so much energy and there was only so much she could burn off running around the backyard.

I breathed in the cool air as I made my way to the park. The ground was littered with fallen leaves, my steps causing them to crunch beneath me.

The park was nearly void of people with it being so early in the morning. People doing their own runs or riding their bikes waved as they passed me.

I never understood waving to the people you pass in the park like you knew them, but I was also trying to change my outlook on life, so I waved back.

By the time Luna and I finished and headed back to the house, an hour had passed and Logan's car was missing from the driveway.

I brought Luna in the house and filled her bowl with water so she could drink.

"Where'd Logan go?" I asked Dad as he sat in front of the TV. I sat down beside him after giving Luna her water.

"He went to pick up Dana, then they're going to Carson's later," Dad replied. His own eyes widened at the sound of Carson's name leaving his lips and he looked at me like he had just made a huge mistake.

I rolled my eyes. "You can say his name, I'm not going to freak."

"You're really taking this surprisingly well."

"I cried my eyes out last night and that was enough for me I think."

Dad's gaze settled on me like he was trying to find some hidden meaning behind my words, like he thought he had to read between the lines.

"Dad, *seriously*, " I said, trying to convince him. "I'm fine. Yeah, it sucks being dumped but I'm okay."

He smiled at that and threw his arm around my shoulders.

"I'm proud of you," he said, squeezing my shoulder.

And with hearing that, my eyes started to sting, but I didn't let him see.

***

Carson Hughes

"So we're gathering here now?" Isaac asked as he stepped into my house.

"I really can't go to Logan's right now," I told him.

"Holy shit," Isaac replied, sitting down on the couch. "Did you and Vinny break up?"

I nodded with a sigh. "I broke up with him yesterday."

"Oh, damn, that sucks," he said, awkwardly scratching the back of his neck. "Sorry."

"It's fine, but can we just... not tell the others about it right now?" I asked, sitting beside him. "Logan knows, I'm sure Dana knows, but I just don't wanna talk about it with everyone and I have no idea what this thing is Logan wants to tell everyone."

"Yeah, I won't say anything," Isaac said, leaning forward in his seat. "This might be a bad time to tell you, but I'm back with Spencer. Like for real this time."

"Really?"

Isaac nodded. "I figured, why not? He likes me, I like him, the sex is good."

"Well, I'm happy for you," I said. Isaac deserved to be happy. Just because my relationship fell apart didn't mean I was looking for everyone else around me to crumble too.

"I guess part of me didn't wanna try with him because I thought he was still into Vinny," Isaac admitted. "But I don't know, I thought I'd give it a chance."

"I don't think he is," I assured him. "I've seen them talk while they were both over here a couple times. Spencer just seems to want Vinny to talk to him, nothing else."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot your mom is dating his dad," Isaac said.

Hadley and Archie showed up together a few moments later, leaving us waiting for Logan and Dana.

"Does anyone know what this is about?" Hadley asked, throwing herself down beside me. "Do you think they're breaking up? Would they tell us like this if they're breaking up?"

"They're not breaking up," Archie denied, crossing his arms as he sat on the recliner. "I bet they're, like, getting married or something."

"In high school, Arch?" Hadley questioned, raising her eyebrows.

"Yeah, like in *One Tree Hill* ."

"That is fictional."

"Doesn't mean it doesn't happen."

"You're a fucking idiot," Hadley said with a scoff, looking down at her phone.

"She's probably looking up maid of honor dresses right now," Archie said to us, earning a glare from Hadley.

I stole a glance at her phone and saw that it was opened to texts with Darren and shook my head at Archie.

Logan and Dana entered the house a moment later, hands clasped together as they made their way over to the loveseat.

"Sorry we're late," Dana said, resting her and Logan's hands in her lap.

"What's going on girl?" Hadley asked, leaning forward in her seat. "You got me worried."

Logan and Dana gave each other a look.

"Well, there's no sense in beating around the bush," Logan said, looking at each of us.

"I'm pregnant," Dana said after taking a deep breath. Logan rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb. "And I'm keeping the baby."

Suddenly, Archie's marriage idea didn't seem so far fetched. I looked at Logan and saw the calmness on his face like he had prepared himself for this, like the two had known about Dana's pregnancy for a while before this.

"Oh my God!" Hadley exclaimed. "I'm going to be an Auntie!" She got up and rushed over to Dana, squeezing herself beside her on the loveseat and hugging her.

Dana laughed and hugged her back, letting go of Logan's hand.

"Wow," I said. "Um, congrats? I know it probably wasn't planned..."

Logan snorted. "Definitely not."

"I don't mean to sound like a bitch, but why are you keeping it?" Hadley asked, causing Archie to let out a loud laugh.

"You bitch," he laughed, hunching over. She glared at him, showing him her middle finger, before turning back to Dana.

"I don't mean it in a bad way, I'm just curious," she assured Dana.

"It's fine," Dana laughed. "I just... I guess I just really want this baby. I almost went through with an abortion, but then we told Logan's parents and they were so supportive and I guess I just wasn't as scared anymore. So I wanted to keep the baby."

"So you haven't told your parents?" Isaac asked.

Logan shook his head. "Only my parents, Vinny, and you guys know."

"What are you going to do when you tell them?" I wondered. It wasn't a secret how religious Dana's parents were. They would either kick her out or force her and Logan to get married.

"I've been secretly moving some of my stuff over to Logan's over the last couple days," Dana replied. "That's why we were kinda late. We were moving some stuff while my parents aren't home."

"So you'll live there?"

"That's the plan," she said. "I just need to get enough of my stuff out of the house before we tell them and it'll be harder to go back there."

"If you need anything, I'm here to help, I swear," Hadley said with a hand over her heart.

Dana thanked her and gave her another hug.

"So when do we find out if it's a boy or a girl?" Archie asked. "I guess it doesn't matter. The kid will have so much fun with Uncle Archie either way."

"You think we're going to leave our baby alone with you?" Logan questioned.

"Not while they're a baby," he said. "When they're a toddler, like two."

"No."

"I go to my first appointment next week," Dana told us. "It'll probably be a while before we know."

I was shocked, to say the least, about the revelation. But when I looked at the two of them, saw how happy they were, I could tell they were going to be the best parents this kid could ask for.

***

Monday morning at school felt like I was back at the beginning of the year. Having a few days off for Thanksgiving made it even harder to go back to school. I was dreading it all over again.

But when I walked into English class that morning with Isaac, and saw Vinny sitting in his usual spot with a book in hand, I suddenly wasn't dreading it anymore.

I hadn't seen him or spoke to him since the weekend when we broke up, but seeing him now, sitting in the seat he knew was next to mine, made me happier than I thought it would.

Vinny didn't notice us enter the room. He was to immersed in his book to even look up. Isaac shot me a look when I began walking over to him, like he thought I was about to break down at the sight of Vinny.

"Hey," I said, sitting down on my chair beside Vinny. He looked up from his book and smiled at me, bending the corner of the page to keep his spot as he closed it.

"Hey," he replied.

"I'm glad you still sat here," I told him.

"Me too."

This moment put my heartache on pause. Seeing Vinny and him not avoiding me was not something I expected. I fully expected Vinny to keep his head down and sit at the back of the class, steering clear of me at all costs. But this was a pleasant surprise, one that I welcomed with everything in me. One that made me think I didn't have to lose him completely.

"I'm sorry for, uh, kicking you out the other day," Vinny said, clearing his throat and looking down at his desk. "I just needed some time to myself to, uh, process."

"It's okay," I assured him. "I understand."

It had hurt at the time when Vinny told me to leave. It ripped my heart out and threw it on the floor, but looking back on it, I did understand. He did what he had to do for himself. He couldn't tell me he loved me back as I was leaving him, it would hurt too much. And he couldn't keep me in his room while he tried to process what had happened. He need his space, his time, and I wasn't entitled to that.

And it seemed as though it did him well to make me leave and have time to himself, with the comfort of his brother, because when he looked at me, it wasn't with sadness. It was with the same adoration he always did.

I didn't see Vinny again until gym class where we played a game of handball. He was on the opposite team, but he was actually trying which was something new for him.

Logan was acting strange. He had a glare set on Seth wherever he went, his focus completely on him.

"What's going on with you?" I asked him in a hushed tone as we walked to the side for a water break.

"Nothing." His voice was low, muttered.

"Did Seth mess with Vinny again?"

That was all I could think would make Logan act like this. Seth didn't have the best track record when it came to Vinny, and Logan knew it. Something must have happened and I felt myself get anxious, waiting to find out what it was.

"It's nothing," Logan said.

It clearly wasn't. When class ended and we went back to the locker room to change, Logan's hard glare stayed on Seth. He didn't take his eyes off him. He looked like he was two seconds away from ripping him apart.

And Seth noticed.

So did Vinny, and he walked over to his brother shaking his head.

"Whatever you're thinking about, you need to stop," Vinny told him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Logan continued scowling and was about to say something to Vinny before Seth interjected.

"What are you looking at me like that for, Logan?" Seth asked with a glare of his own, his shoulders squared like he was readying himself to pounce. "Did Vinny tell you something?"

That was enough to set Logan off and I was too shocked to move.

Logan jumped at Seth, his fist slamming into his face as he knocked him to the ground. Seth must not have been expecting it because Logan got a few more punches in before Seth fought back.

No one in the locker room moved for a moment. It was like we were all frozen in a state of shock, none of us seeing this coming. Except Vinny.

"Logan!" he shouted. "Logan stop! He's gonna beat the shit out of you!"

Logan was too enraged to listen. He was holding his own better than I thought he would until Seth turned them over and slammed Logan's head into the ground.

Vinny rushed over to them and grabbed onto Seth's shoulders and, surprisingly, pulled him off his brother.

But Logan didn't stop there. With bloodied knuckles and face, he charged after Seth again, punching him repeatedly and shoving him against the lockers.

No one intervened. I was frozen, knowing I should step in and pull Logan away, but unable to move.

"Logan!" Vinny yelled again. "Logan, it wasn't Seth!"

I didn't know what he meant by that. I looked over at him. He looked desperate to get him to stop.

"Logan!" he shouted again.

Logan used all his strength and shoved Seth against the lockers again.

"Logan!"

No response.

"It was Darren!"

Both of them stopped, their gazes shooting over to him. Logan looked at him with wide eyes.

Seth's eyes looked black, like something had taken over him.

And then he charged at Vinny.

**

Hey everyone. Thanks for reading!

So... tell me your thoughts :)

49

TRIGGER WARNING: mention of sexual assault/rape, brief mention of extreme sexual violence

Vinny Taylor

The world slowed around me as my back hit the floor. The impact from Seth knocking the wind out of me rattled my bones. His hands found their way to my neck and squeezed, shaking me and hitting my head back against the floor. I was too shocked to fight back, but I clawed at his hands, trying anything to get them off me.

Seth looked inhuman as he stared down at me with rage. His eyes were wide and black and his teeth were clenched together in a snarl.

"Now why would you go and do that Vinny?" Seth growled as I continued pulling at his hands. "I told you what would happen if you started crying rape, didn't I? I know you don't actually believe Darren raped you."

I couldn't breathe and I struggled beneath him. Logan and Carson were pulling at Seth's back, trying to throw him off me, but his grip was too tight. Wherever they pulled him, I went with him.

I could hear yelling, but I couldn't make out any of the words.

"Because why would he?" Seth continued. "You were willing to give him whatever he wanted. You *liked* it."

My vision was starting to blur and I was sure I was going to pass out until, suddenly, Seth's hands left my neck and I gasped for air.

Seth backed away, holding his head. Standing next to him was one of his football teammates holding a plastic baseball bat that he had just whacked against Seth's head.

"What the fuck!" Seth exclaimed angrily, glaring up at his teammate. "Are you trying to give me a fucking concussion a week before the championship?"

"I was *trying* not to watch you murder Vinny Taylor on the locker room floor," the teammate shot back, holding the bat up like he was ready to hit him again.

Carson and Logan were both at my side in an instant as I laid back on the floor, trying to catch my breath. I gasped for air, my throat hurting with every breath and my eyes fluttering as I stared at the lights on the ceiling. It still felt like something was closing my throat.

"Can you stand?" Carson asked in a soft tone, his eyes glossy and wide with concern. "So we can take you to the nurse."

Before I could respond, Coach Bronson was storming into the locker room, one of the scrawny kids from our class following closely behind him. He looked down at me with a red face, then over at Logan then Seth.

"Everybody *out* !" he screamed. "Except for Seth and Logan. Carson, take Vinny to the nurse."

I leaned up against my elbows and watched as everyone filed out of the locker room. Seth was still hunched over on the floor, holding one hand up to his head as he glared at his teammate who threw the plastic bat down on the ground and walked out.

"Come on, Vinny," Carson urged, helping me to my feet.

I let out a cough and tried to even my breathing as Carson lightly pulled me up. He guided me out of the room and I looked back at Coach Bronson standing between Seth and Logan with an infuriated expression. His face was so red he looked like he was going to explode.

"Are you okay?" Carson asked me, still holding onto my arm as we walked through the hall, as if he was afraid I would fall over without his support.

"Not really," I croaked out, surprising even myself at the sound of my own voice. It sounded like I had spent the last five hours screaming and lost my voice.

"Jesus Christ," Carson said, shaking his head and looking at my neck with a concerned expression. "He left handprints."

I brought my hand up to touch my neck, but Carson caught it in his and brought it back down.

"Just... just leave it, okay?" Carson said in a soft voice, not releasing my hand. "Can you breathe alright?"

"Hurts," I rasped.

Carson looked at me as if he was the one in pain just by seeing me hurt.

"I'm so sorry, Vinny," he said.

"Not your fault," I replied.

And I hoped that he would feel bad enough to keep holding my hand. It was a selfish thought, but I didn't want to let go and it was the only thing keeping me from thinking too hard about what had just happened. Seth trying to strangle me, what I admitted for everyone to hear, what Seth said...

"And I'm sorry about— uh, about what Seth said," Carson continued, rubbing his thumb on the back of my hand. "I heard him, I uh, I think everyone did."

That meant it wouldn't take long for the rumors to start flying. People would be talking about it any minute now. All of it. And I would have to duck my head in the halls to not see the stares being sent my way and slip my headphones in my ears to not hear the whispers.

And I would maybe even have to face *him* once he caught wind of what was going on, after having spent so much time and effort avoiding him.

"I don't want to talk about it right now," I told him, gripping onto his hand harder.

Carson nodded, squeezing my hand back, and at that I felt a sudden wave of relief that he was there with me. His presence was keeping me level-headed, keeping me from falling into a dark place and even though I was sure he had burning questions, he was as patient and understanding with me as he always was.

"Thank you, Carson," I said, stepping closer to him.

"For what?"

"Just... thank you."

He smiled sadly at me and the next moment we were walking into the nurse's office. Nurse Amy jumped up from her desk when she saw me, her eyes zeroing in on my neck.

"Come here right now!" she said with a panicked expression. I pulled Carson along with me and followed her into the back of the office near the beds separated by curtains. "Who did this? Does someone already know about this?" she asked.

Nurse Amy sat me down on the bed and Carson stood at the end. She lightly prodded at my neck, asking me to take a deep breath.

"Coach Bronson is handling it," Carson told her.

She looked over at him. "I really shouldn't be letting you in here."

"He stays," I said and she gave me a concerned look at the sound of my voice.

She pressed on my neck and shined a flashlight down my throat for the next few minutes.

"There's probably some internal bruising, but I can't be sure if there are more serious injuries. You definitely need to go to the doctor," she said. "I

have to go call your parents."

"Call my dad," I told her. She nodded and walked away.

There was no doubt in my mind that Dad was going to go absolutely insane when he saw me, but I needed him here and I didn't think I could face my mom.

"Carson, you need to go to class," Nurse Amy told him when she came back. "Your brother is here, Vinny."

Carson glanced back at me as he started to leave.

"I'll call you later if that's okay?" he said and I nodded.

"Yeah, please," I replied and then Logan was coming into the room. He said something to Carson before he walked out and then Logan sat down next to me while Nurse Amy started disinfecting the gashes on his knuckles and face.

"Dad's coming," I told him.

He sighed. "Great. You sound like shit."

"I know."

Logan's jaw was clenched as Nurse Amy finished cleaning his cuts and bandaging them.

"Just make sure you keep them clean," she told him. "Nothing looks like it needs stitches."

"Thanks," he replied before Nurse Amy told us she would go to the front and wait for our dad.

Logan waited until she was gone before he started speaking again.

"Was it really Darren?" he muttered, looking down at his lap with a frown.

I let out a shuddered breath, my voice hoarse and shaking. "Yeah, it was."

"Fuck," he murmured, shaking his head. "How? I mean, I was so sure about Seth... and Darren— fuck!"

Logan stood up and started pacing in front of me.

"I hung around with him, I brought him to *our house* ," Logan said, pulling at his hair, then, his eyes widened. "He was over one day and you locked yourself in your room... I should've known something was wrong!"

" *Logan* ," I said, urging him to sit back down. "Just... chill out."

"I can't Vin, I really can't," he said, stopping in front of me. "I feel like I'm going to throw up."

Logan really did look like shit. His face was pale and he looked like he was in a cold sweat, his hair sticking to the skin on his neck.

"You shouldn't have fucking done that," I snapped. "Attacking Seth like that. What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I was *thinking* that he *raped* you," Logan answered through gritted teeth. "He's been messing with you and threatening you all school year. What was I supposed to think?"

"Do you have any idea what that whole stunt just did to me?" I asked, straining my voice. "He tried to fucking kill me! And everyone in there heard what he said. The whole school probably knows by now!"

Logan's expression softened and he started to look guilty. He sat back down beside me and put his head in his hands.

"I—" He paused for a moment. "I'm sorry, Vinny. I was just so *angry* . I was blinded by it. I didn't think that far ahead. All I thought was I wanted to hurt him. I wanted him to feel even half the pain I thought he caused you."

I didn't say anything. Logan picked his head up and looked over at me before letting out a sigh and running his hand through his hair.

"Can you just— Can you help me understand how Seth fits into all this?" he asked. "He can't be innocent. I know he can't."

"He's not," I instantly replied. "He knows what Darren did and chose to threaten me into silence to protect him. That's not the first time—" I paused. "That's not the first time I thought he was going to kill me."

Logan seemed to have a permanent scowl etched onto his face. His eyes darkened like he was ready to pounce on Seth again.

"What are you talking about?" he asked in a low tone.

I debated whether I wanted to actually tell him about what had gone on with Seth. While what had happened with Darren was traumatizing and painful and hard to cope with, Seth had actually made me fear for my life. He had made sure he had instilled enough fear in me to keep me quiet, at least until the two of them could get far away from this town.

"Seth... He— After what happened with Darren," I started. "He threatened me."

"How?"

I looked down at my lap then quickly brought my gaze back up when I felt the pain in my neck.

"In the summer, there was a time on Friday nights when I was alone," I started to explain. "When Mom and Dad were out on their date night and when you were out with Dana. That was when I could bring guys over to the house, so Darren knew exactly when I would be alone."

Logan stayed silent, willing me to continue.

"So, it was a Friday night when Darren... you know," I continued, wincing as I cleared my throat. "And then the Friday after, Seth came around."

"Into the house?"

I shook my head. "He was going there, but I was outside walking. I started doing that at night when I wanted to get out of my room. Seth found me on his way to the house. He stopped his car and dragged me into the woods."

Logan was clenching his jaw and his injured fist. I didn't want to tell him the rest, but the other part of me wanted him to know how evil Seth was, how this incident could possibly hurt me.

"He had me up against a tree and I was struggling, but I couldn't get away from him," I said. "Darren had been texting me during the week, saying he wanted me still. I told him he needed to stop fucking talking to me because he raped me. He must've told Seth and Seth was beyond pissed."

I took a deep breath before continuing.

"The thing is, he didn't even have to hit me to scare me. I thought he would kill me right there," I said. "But he told me that if I told *anyone* that Darren raped me, he would... *really* rape me with an... object. And that he would assume if he saw me with anyone, I was telling them about it."

Logan's face morphed into an expression of rage, similar to his look in the locker room.

"Don't you see how fucking sick in the head he is?" I hissed. "And now I've practically told everyone and he's going to come after me!"

"No, he's not," Logan denied. "He's not going anywhere near you."

"He'll find a fucking way, Logan," I snapped. "People who really wanna hurt people will always find a way."

Logan let out a loud groan then tried to compose himself.

He let out a breath. "So, you think Darren told him about what he did? And that's how he knew you'd be alone and he could go after you? How did Darren know you'd be alone?"

"Logan, I was hooking up with him well before he did what he did."

"Oh," he said, shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts. "Right."

"I was on a Grindr date with some asshole before school ended. Darren saw us and he must've assumed it was a date. I saw him in the bathroom and he told me if I was having a bad time with the asshole, then I could go home with him, so I did."

And if I could have taken that choice back and taken my chances with the asshole, I would have. But I had a feeling that even if things played out differently that night, Darren would have still found his way into my life somehow.

"And we were hooking up for a while," I told him. "He didn't like when he wasn't the only one I was hooking up with. He didn't know about Isaac, but he thought I had something going on with Spencer. He got possessive and clingy, so I broke it off."

I took a deep breath and continued.

"Then, a few days later I hooked up with Spencer and you walked in on us," I said and Logan pressed his lips into a thin line. "Then a few days after that, on Friday, Darren came by the house trying to get me to hook up with him again, I said no and told him I was trying things with Spencer and he just... exploded."

I would never forget the look in his eyes. It seemed like a switch flipped and everything changed. He became a new person, angry and violent. He had always been rough, but not to the point of hurting me, to the point of forcing me.

"I'm going to kill him," Logan said, his voice rough. "He befriended me, he started dating Hadley, came to our house *knowing* what he did to you. Like the truth wouldn't eventually come out."

"Him and Seth are both psychos, Logan," I told him. "Darren's probably got himself convinced he didn't do anything wrong, but Seth doesn't care either way. And now I'm completely fucked because who knows what *both* of them are going to do to me now."

Logan didn't have time to answer before Dad came storming into the room behind the nurses office, throwing the curtains back to stand in front of us. His face shattered when he looked at me, at the marks on my neck.

"Oh, Vinny," he said kneeling in front of me. "What little piece of shit did this to you?"

Before I could answer, he turned to Logan.

"And you," he said. "What the fuck were you thinking getting in a fight?"

"He had it coming, Dad," Logan argued. "He's the one who did this to Vinny."

Dad stood up. "I got the run down on the phone, but they wouldn't tell me who it was."

"Seth Powers."

"The fucking quarterback?" Dad asked. "Well, we have to wait here for the principal before we can go and he better hurry his ass up so I can take you to a doctor."

No sooner than the words left his mouth, Principal Williams was coming into the room with one of the school security guards beside him.

"Mr. Taylor, I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances," Principal Williams said, extending a hand for Dad to shake.

Dad shook his hand. "What's going on?"

"Would you like to discuss this in private?"

He shook his head. "We can talk in front of my sons."

"Very well," Principal Williams said. "Multiple witnesses in the locker room say that Logan started the fight, but since this is the first incident Logan has had, we have decided on a two-day at home suspension for

Tuesday and Wednesday and a two-day in school suspension for Thursday and Friday."

Dad crossed his arms. "What about the other kid?"

"I cannot discuss other students with you, Mr. Taylor. Do you have any objections to your son's suspension?"

"Not right now, but I might if I find out the kid who tried to strangle my son doesn't have something worse."

"Again, I cannot discuss other students with you."

"What, is he getting nothing?" Dad asked. "Because he's your hot-shot quarterback and you have a championship next week so he can't miss any school otherwise he can't play? Am I getting this right?"

"Mr. Taylor—"

"Let me ask you this, Mr. Williams, how is my son supposed to feel safe at school knowing that someone who attacked him is just let off the hook? Are you just going to allow students to be attacked like this?"

"Mr. Taylor, I understand your frustration, but the other student will be dealt with in a way I see fit."

"Are we done here?" Dad asked before looking back at us. "Let's go, boys. Now."

Dad led us out of the room without another word from Principal Williams. As we walked out into the hall, the bell rang to end the current period.

And the stares had already started.

**

Happy Monday everyone. Thanks for reading !

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

50

TRIGGER WARNING: mention of sexual assault/rape

Carson Hughes

It was useless for me to be at school. I couldn't focus. Not with what had happened in the locker room, with what Seth did to Vinny, with what he said to him. The vision of Vinny on the floor with Seth's hand wrapped around his neck was on a continuous loop in my head, the sound of Seth's wicked tone being a constant sound.

I know you don't actually believe Darren raped you.

I couldn't escape those words. They wouldn't leave my mind. They stayed there, torturing me, making me want to throw up then find Darren and tear his head off.

Darren. Just thinking about him made me clench my fists in anger. I was angry at him, and at myself for letting my guard down, for stopping my suspicions of him. I should've known, should've trusted my instincts about him.

I thought back to all my interactions with him, trying to nit pick every action I had seen him do, every word I heard him say. It was to the point that I couldn't tell if I was making certain things up in my head just because I now knew of his guilt.

He looked at Vinny strangely when we saw him in the woods with Thomas. But was it a strange look or was he just *looking* ? Did he react strangely when he found out about me dating Vinny or was he just surprised?

There was no way I could tell. I hadn't paid enough attention. But I paid *a lot* of attention to Vinny and I couldn't remember a time he ever interacted with Darren. He locked himself in his room and told me not to go up there

when Darren had been at his house. He hadn't just wanted to be alone; he wanted to keep Darren *out* .

I thought of the way Vinny had been so hesitant to sleep over at my house or have me sleep in his room, the way he hated being alone in his house, and how he sometimes got freaked out when we were kissing if he wasn't completely in control. I also thought about how he was so easily scared while he was in the house and how he always sat at his window sill, half facing the door like he was on alert and ready to escape through the window if he had to.

I should have put it together. I had noticed all these things but never thought about what they actually meant.

What other signs had I missed?

Guilt ate at me when I realized earlier in the year I had called him to pick us all up from Darren's house when I was too drunk to drive, the first night I kissed him. He must have felt like he had no other choice. It was *my* fault he had to go there, to risk running into Darren, to no doubt be plagued by memories of what Darren had done to him.

"Carson," I was pulled from my thoughts by my teacher. "You're wanted in Principal Williams' office."

I stood up from my seat, gathering my things. My classmates watched me as I moved, some whispering to each other. There was no doubt people had already heard about what took place in the locker room this morning, no doubt people were already making assumptions and taking sides.

I rushed out of the room and made my way to the principal's office, looking in through the windows before I entered. I didn't want to see Seth there. If I did, I didn't know if I would be able to hold myself back from him. Luckily, the office appeared to be empty other than the secretaries in front.

"I'm Carson Hughes," I told the lady at the desk when I entered. "I got called by Principal Williams."

She didn't even have time to respond before he was walking toward me.

"Carson, please come have a seat," he said, gesturing toward his office.

When I entered the room, I suddenly felt trapped. The office was smaller than I had imagined it. The walls were bare except for framed degrees and awards and our school's football poster.

"Carson, you were in the locker room this morning, correct?" Principal Williams asked as the both of us sat down.

I nodded. "Yeah, I was."

"I'm going to have you answer a few questions for me," he said. "Who initiated the conflict between Logan and Seth?"

This was why it felt like a trap. He wanted me to incriminate Logan.

"Logan started it, but—"

"I understand you're friends with Logan, but please refrain from making excuses for him."

"It's not an excuse for Logan," I told him, surprising myself with how I was talking to him. "Logan hit him first, but Seth *attacked* Vinny. He tried to strangle him, he said—"

"I'm not interested in words exchanged at the moment," Principal Williams interjected. "I'm interested in the violence that took place."

"You don't understand," I said in a pleading tone. "It's really serious. Seth said Darren—"

"Was Darren Sanderson in the locker room?"

I gritted my teeth. "No."

"Okay," he said. "So you agree Logan started the fight?"

"He did, but Seth attacked Vinny for no reason," I said, gripping the arms of the chair. "Vinny was just telling Logan to stop and Seth attacked him."

I couldn't tell Principal Williams about what Seth had said about Darren. He wouldn't take it seriously and he obviously didn't want to hear it. He wanted to hear the least amount of incriminating information about his football players as possible. Logan and Vinny were expendable to him, but not Seth and Darren. They had a game to win next week. That was what he cared about.

"Thank you, Mr. Hughes," Principal Williams said, folding his hands in his desk. "You can head back to class now."

I stared at him for a moment before standing up and shaking my head, then leaving the office.

As soon as I stepped out into the hallway, someone gripped my shirt and pulled me into the corridor behind the office. I braced myself for impact before realizing it was Hadley staring up at me with tear filled eyes and a blotchy face.

"Is it true?" she whispered.

I nodded, not even having to ask what she was talking about. It was obvious she heard about Darren.

"Fuck," she cursed, wiping her eyes. "I need to get out of here. I can't see him right now."

"We'll go," I assured her. "We'll go now."

"He drove me to school this morning."

"I'll drive you," I said, grabbing onto her arm. "We can go back to my house."

Hadley nodded and the two of us snuck out through the emergency exits in the back of the school before rounding the building back to the parking lot

where my car was. We were leaving during the start of our lunch period, so our parents wouldn't be getting a call that we cut class until later.

I didn't know what to say to Hadley. There was nothing I could say. Her phone rang after a few minutes and she wiped her eye before answering and putting it on speaker.

"Where the fuck are you?" Archie demanded. "If you're with Darren you need to get away from him right now."

"I'm with Carson," she said with a sniffle. "We're going to his house. You're on speaker."

"Have you heard what people are saying?" he asked.

"Yes, Archie, I heard. Why do you think we're leaving?"

"Okay, the rest of us are skipping then, if you're skipping," Archie replied. "Carson, do you know where Logan is?"

"Last I heard, Jeff was on his way to get Vinny, I assume Logan left too," I told him.

Archie ended the phone call telling us that he, Isaac, and Dana would be on their way to my house and I feared that school had taken a turn for the worst. It was hard not to think about what people were saying, the different ways in which the story was being twisted as it came out of the mouths of people who weren't there. What was worse than that was the thought of what people were saying about Vinny. I wanted to shield him from all of this.

Hadley and I arrived at my house a few minutes later and walked inside. Mom had already gone to work for the day, so we would be able to be alone in this moment.

"Are you okay, Hads?" I asked her as she sat down on the couch.

She put her head in her hands. "No," she muttered with a shaky breath. "I'm not. I'm angry and sad and scared and confused."

"What exactly did you hear?" I asked, sitting down next to her.

She looked up at me. "People are saying that Darren raped Vinny. I talked to one of the guys that was in the locker room and he said that Seth attacked Vinny and started saying stuff about Darren raping him."

I nodded. "That's pretty much what happened. Logan thought it was Seth and went after him."

"I just..." Hadley sighed, wiping her eyes. "I just can't believe this. Well, part of me can—"

"What?"

"He's just... rough I guess," she told me. "I thought it was normal, just how he liked it, but maybe it's something more than that."

I leaned back on the couch and stared straight ahead.

I wanted to go to Vinny. I needed to see him, to make sure he was alright and to comfort him if he wasn't. But that was no longer my place. And Hadley was here and I couldn't leave her.

A few minutes later, Archie, Isaac, and Dana pulled up to the house and let themselves in. Dana immediately sat at Hadley's side while Isaac sat down on the loveseat and Archie stood in front of us.

"This is *bad* ," Archie said, his hands on his hips.

It was strange to see him look so serious, but the situation was jarring, shaking even he who was always joking and carefree.

"No shit, Arch," Hadley said, leaning into Dana's side.

"There's a video going around," he said, digging his phone out of his pocket. "Of what happened in the locker room."

Archie turned the phone around so we could see. The video started in the middle of Seth and Logan's fight. Vinny pulled Seth off of his brother, then

Logan went back to fighting with Seth. Vinny's yelling came in through the phone screen as he tried convincing his brother to stop.

The finally, *"It was Darren!"*

And Seth went for Vinny, clasping his hands around his throat. The video went on until Coach Bronson entered the locker room, showing Logan and I trying to get Seth off of Vinny and the football player that hit Seth in the head to get him to stop.

Seth's words to Vinny were clear as day in the video.

"I told you what would happen if you started crying rape, didn't I? I know you don't actually believe Darren raped you." and *"Because why would he? You were willing to give him whatever he wanted. You liked it."*

" Oh my God," Hadley gasped, a hand over her mouth as she watched the video. "This is so fucked!"

"Did you know, Carson?" Archie asked, slipping his phone back into his pocket. "About Darren? And you didn't say anything?"

My eyes widened and I fought the urge to stand up from the couch to be chest to chest with him.

"No, I didn't know," I told him. "And I hope you're not suggesting what I think you are."

He had no right to be angry with Vinny for keeping quiet about Darren. Vinny was the one who had been hurt, he had trauma, he feared for his safety, and I wasn't going to let Archie blame Vinny for the fact that Hadley had stayed with Darren for so long. That wasn't his fault. It was just a bad situation either way. Not telling Hadley put her in danger, but now that it was out, Vinny was in danger and that had already been proven by Seth's actions.

"What exactly do you think I'm suggesting?" Archie asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"That Vinny should have spoken up about it."

He shrugged. "Okay, you can't disagree that maybe he should have. What if he had done the same to Hadley? Maybe he did. We don't even know!"

"He didn't, Arch," Hadley spoke up.

"You're not blaming Vinny for this!" Dana snapped with a glare at Archie. "It's a fucked up situation, but something really bad happened to him and we're not going to act like he's not the victim in this." Hadley nodded in agreement.

Archie sighed and sat down on the couch next to Isaac.

"Sorry," Archie mumbled.

I looked over at Isaac who had a stoic expression on his face. This information had struck all of us. Not only did we find out the truth about who Hadley's boyfriend really is, but Vinny, someone we all know, our friend's brother, was a victim of Darren's. They had all seen Vinny change this summer and now they knew why.

"Has anyone heard from Logan?" Isaac asked, looking to Dana who nodded.

"He's going to the doctor with his dad and Vinny," she replied.

"What am I going to do?" Hadley cried, her mouth turned down in a frown. "I have to break up with him—"

"And you're not going alone," Archie cut in. "Me and Isaac will go with you. I would say Carson and Logan too but they'd probably kill him and we don't need them getting charged with murder."

"Just text him and say it's over," Dana said.

"No because he'll want to talk in person and he'll find me," Hadley replied, letting out a shuddering breath before turning to me. "How is Vinny doing?"

The question shook me because the truth was that I didn't know. I hadn't spoken to him since I left him in the nurses office earlier, but the others wouldn't know that. The only ones who knew we had broken up were Logan and Isaac, and possibly Dana.

"I... uh, I don't know," I said. "I brought him to the nurse today, but I haven't talked to him since. We, uh, we broke up."

Hadley's eyes widened. "You did?"

I nodded. "Over the weekend."

But that didn't stop me from wanting to go to him, to hold him during this time when he was undoubtedly stressed. I needed to stay away though, to let him deal with all this how he wanted or needed to. I didn't want to give mixed signals or false hope.

Isaac was shaking his head, not having listened to my exchange with Hadley.

"I just— I can't believe this," he said, putting his head in his hands. "It's so hard to wrap my head around."

I had nearly forgotten Isaac had spent time with Vinny over the summer, most likely before the incident with Darren.

We were all silent for a few minutes as Dana continued to console Hadley. Then Archie started talking about how she needed to dump Darren and exactly how she should do it, which led to an argument between them.

The whole time, all I thought of was Vinny.

***

Vinny Taylor

After spending the afternoon at the ER with Dad and Logan, I was more than ready to go home. Dad had luckily kept his mouth shut while Logan and I were being examined by the doctors, but I knew that as soon as we

were home, he would have a million questions for the two of us about what had happened. And I didn't think Logan would be keeping anything to himself.

Luckily, Seth hadn't done any serious damage to my throat. There was some bruising that the doctor said would heal with time and that I should try to eat soft foods for the time being. Logan ended up needing some stitches in his knuckles, but he was otherwise fine.

Dad had driven us back to the school to pick up Logan's car after the school day was over and I was surprised Dad had let me out of his sight so that I could ride home with Logan. But once we were home, the questions started. And Logan didn't hold back as he told Dad exactly what happened.

Except for me saying Darren's name. He didn't want to be the one to tell Dad that. He knew about the disagreements between the two of us about what to do. Logan telling Dad about Darren would start a whole other argument now.

"So why did he go after Vinny?" Dad asked. "Was he really the one who... the one who raped you?"

Logan looked to me.

"No, Dad," I said in a strained voice. "It wasn't Seth."

"Then who?" he demanded urgently, yet softly.

I let out a deep breath.

"It was his friend," I said. "Darren Sanderson."

Saying that name out loud so many times today, thinking about him so much, brought back so many memories. Memories I tried so hard to suppress because even the good ones were tainted by what he had done to me

*

Five months ago, June

All this dude did was talk about himself.

That was all I could think as I sat across from him. This would be the last time I let one of my Grindr matches take me out on a date. From here on out that app would be strictly about sex for me. It would take a lot less effort that way, and save me from the annoyance.

"I'm going to go take a piss," I said, abruptly standing from the table. "Be right back."

I didn't wait for his response before leaving him alone at the table and heading toward the restroom. I held the bathroom door open for the person behind me and recoiled when I was met with a familiar face.

"You on a date with that guy?" Darren asked with an easy grin.

"None of your business."

"It's okay if you are," Darren assured me. "I won't say anything."

I stood at the sink and stared at myself in the mirror as Darren stood at the one beside me.

"Did you follow me in here just to say that?" I asked, wetting my hands and running them through my hair. I hadn't even seen Daren in the restaurant and I had made sure to scope it out as soon as we got here.

"No," he said. "I followed you in here because you look like you're having a horrible time and..." He trailed off, pausing as if he wasn't sure about his next words. "If you're planning on going home with him after, maybe you should consider coming home with me instead."

My eyes widened and my head shot over to him. His expression was serious, a little sheepish, but there was no lingering joke.

"That's not fucking funny," I told him, shaking my head and looking back toward the mirror.

"I'm not joking," he replied, completely serious.

"You want me to believe you all of a sudden want to hook up with me?" I asked him, raising my eyebrows at him through the mirror.

"It's really not that sudden," he said and I tried not to overthink his words. "I thought I was hallucinating when I saw you here with that guy, when I realized you might actually be into guys. I figured this was my only shot."

It was hard for me to believe a word he said. It was just so out of left field that Darren Sanderson, some dumbass jock from my school, had the hots for me. And what other chance would I get with someone like him? Someone handsome and sought after. If I waited too long, trying to play a game with him, he might end up realizing he didn't want me after all. And then I would lose out on fucking a jock.

"Fine," I finally said after a pause. "Let me get rid of that asshole out there then we'll go."

Darren smirked. "Let me get rid of Seth."

"Meet me at my car in ten minutes."

Darren's grin widened and he watched me with playful eyes as he exited the bathroom.

I splashed water on my face. Part of me felt like I was making a huge mistake getting involved with him. But the other part, the louder, stronger part didn't care one bit about me getting myself involved with a closeted jock. In fact, this part thought it was a grand idea, exciting and hot.

And so I ditched the Grindr date and drove Darren back to my house and the two of us went for so many rounds I started to lose count

*

I shook my head, trying to rid the thoughts of Darren from my head, but they kept pouring in.

"Shit," Logan said, grabbing the attention of Dad and me.

"What?" Dad asked.

"There's a video from the locker room," he replied. "Archie sent it to me."

My eyes widened. "How much is on the video?"

"Pretty much all of it. Just missing the very beginning"

Fuck. Everyone had probably seen that by now, had heard me yell out Darren's name, heard what Seth had said I was accusing his friend of.

"Vinny," Dad said, bringing me back to reality after my eyes had glazed over at Logan's words. "How about you stay home from school tomorrow," he suggested, though I didn't think he would let me go even if I refused to listen to him.

I nodded and rubbed my neck where the bruising was. Dad's eyes went directly to my injuries and his face hardened like he was trying to contain his rage.

"Dana texted and said they're all at Carson's," Logan said, bringing his eyes up from his phone to me. "And Hadley knows... about Darren."

"Great," I replied.

I tried not to let myself feel guilty about not warning Hadley about Darren, but the guilt flooded in anyway. I had pushed Darren so far back in my brain that part of me truly thought that he wouldn't do what he did to anyone else, that he did it because he had something against me, because he wanted to hurt me and control me. But if he had done the same to Hadley, I didn't know if I would be able to forgive myself.

"Wait..." Dad interjected, seeming to connect the dots. "That Darren kid, he's the one who's dating Hadley? That piece of shit had the *nerve* to come back to this house after what he did."

His phone rang and he looked down at it.

"It's your mother," he said with a sigh. "I have to take this." He left the room and I took that chance to look down at my own phone.

I had a missed call and a text from Spencer. I held my breath as I opened it.

From: Spencer

Please call me. I just can't believe what I'm hearing right now. I need to know you're okay.

Spencer. The only one other than Seth that had known about Darren and me. The only person who could see what a bad idea Darren was.

*

Five months ago

I had to get Spencer out of my house. Darren would be here any minute and I didn't need them crossing paths. There was no way Spencer would let it go if he saw Darren walking in here.

"So, I kinda have someone coming over in a little bit," I told him, hoping he would get the hint.

"Isaac?" he asked. He had already known about Isaac and me, and had already voiced his disapproval.

"Not quite, but he'll be here soon..."

Spencer rolled his eyes. "Alright, I can take a hint." He stood up from the couch. "I'll see you later."

I waved at him and then cringed when I saw Darren's car pull up. When he stepped out of the car, Spencer looked back at me with hard eyes.

"Darren Sanderson?" he asked.

"Spence."

Spencer just shook his head and walked out. Darren stopped him outside and the two exchanged words before Spencer walked off to his car and Darren walked inside.

"What was he doing here?" Darren asked as he entered the living room.

"We were just hanging out," I replied, walking up to him and immediately putting my mouth on his. Darren grabbed my face in one of his hands and pulled me off of him. I shot him a look of confusion.

"Were you fucking?" he asked and I let out a laugh.

"No," I said, pulling his hand off my face. "Would it even matter if we were?" I was just joking, but he didn't see it that way.

"Yeah, it would," Darren replied. "I don't want you fucking him."

I didn't care about how deranged he sounded. I couldn't tell if he was being serious or if this was part of some game to set the mood. But it definitely put me in the mood.

"How mad would you be?" I teased, my mouth on his jaw.

"So mad," Darren said, gripping me so hard I thought he would leave bruises. I didn't care, I wanted them

He brought my mouth to his roughly and the two of us went up to my bedroom.

It wasn't until the next day that I saw Spencer again at his house.

"What the fuck are you doing with Darren Sanderson?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "He's fun. And rough."

"He's a closet case," Spencer spat. "He's a closeted jock. You think you're safe if he starts feeling like people are suspecting him? He'll hurt *you."*

"It won't last to the school year," I assured him, though he didn't look reassured. "What did he even say to you yesterday?"

"He said that I better not be fucking you," Spencer said, looking away from me. "He looked so crazy when he said it."

"He's harmless," I told him. "Seriously. I think he was just getting in the mood."

"Ew."

I kicked my feet up on his desk and let out a laugh.

*

Spencer knew about Darren without even really *knowing* . He could tell from that one interaction with him that something wasn't right and it wasn't the only time Spencer had warned me away from him. Spencer didn't like Isaac, but he never warned me about him like he had with Darren. I should have listened.

Despite my better judgement, I clicked on Spencer's name and called.

"Hello?" he answered immediately. "Vin?"

"Hey," I said, letting out a shaky breath. I glanced at Logan before leaving the room, going up to my bedroom.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "I saw that video from the locker room..."

"I should have listened to you," I said, cutting him off. He was silent for a moment, so I continued. "I should have listened. About Darren. I didn't listen to you and then expected you to pick up the pieces."

"Vin, no," Spencer said. "What are you talking about? Expecting me to pick up the pieces?"

"That night after Darren... I went to your house."

He was silent and then I heard a sob.

"And I screamed at you," he cried.

And he had every right to. He had thought I went back to Darren after I told him I wouldn't. He thought I had betrayed his trust after telling him I was giving us a chance. He had been devastated, not thinking clearly. I had been crying. He thought it was because I was about to be begging him for forgiveness.

The thought of that night, and the days leading up to it, caused my breath to lodge in my throat.

*

Four months ago, July

I ignored another call from Darren and put my phone on silent, face down on the nightstand. I had already told him I was done with him and he continued proving to me just how clingy he was and how right I was to break things off.

And now I had Spencer in my bed after agreeing to stop hooking up with other people, especially Darren, so the two of us could have something *, even if it was only physical.*

"We're really doing this?" I asked him, looking over to where he sat on the bed.

Spencer nodded. "I want to."

"You know I can't... I can't promise you anything," I told him, though I had already said this.

"I know," he replied. "It's just sex. I know."

I couldn't help but feel like this was a really bad idea. Even though Spencer knew I wasn't committing to him in the way he wanted me to, I still feared

he would end up hurt. It was the last thing I wanted. And I felt like an asshole for even agreeing to this.

I shoved those thoughts to the back of my mind and joined Spencer on the bed, our shirts coming off and our mouths meeting. It wasn't long before the rest of our clothes were off and we prepared ourselves for what was happening next.

I straddled his hips and he placed his hands on mine as we began. I leaned down and sucked a kiss on his chest and he let out a groan.

The two of us continued, our moaning quiet, but it was enough to distract us from the bedroom door opening until Logan let out a shocked gasp.

My head immediately whipped toward the doorway to see Logan with his mouth open wide, his eyes bulging from his head. I mentally cursed at myself. I was too preoccupied with all my thoughts from before that I had forgotten to lock the door.

"Logan, get out!" I screamed, pulling off of Spencer and covering us both with the blankets.

Logan rushed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. I looked at Spencer to see that he had a bewildered look on his face, holding the covers up to his chin.

"You need to go," I told him, standing from the bed and finding my clothes.

"Vin—"

"Seriously, Spence, get out because I'm about to go kill Logan," I said, throwing my shirt on after putting my boxers and jeans on. It was my own fault for not locking the door, but he shouldn't. e barging in my room. "It was going really good, we'll do it again sometime."

Spencer didn't look pleased with my words as he wordlessly got dressed and left the room. I waited until he was out of the house completely before

storming out of my room and into Logan's. He still looked like he had seen a ghost.

"What the actual fuck, Logan!" I screamed, slamming the door shut behind me. "What the fuck! Why did you come into my room?"

"I was looking for something!" he shouted back. "I didn't know you were in there!"

"You didn't hear us?"

"I had my airpods in!"

"What the fuck were you looking for in my room?"

Logan glanced away from me. "...Condoms."

"I'm going to kill you," I said. "I'm going to fucking kill you!"

"I'll let you because I will never *be able to unsee that," he replied, rubbing his eyes. "Since when are you with Spencer?"*

"None of your fucking business!" I snapped, slamming my hand down on his dresser hard enough to make him jump. "I literally want to strangle you right now."

"Are you freaking out because I walked in on you having sex or because it was with a guy?"

"Shut up, Logan."

"I don't care if you're gay or whatever, Vin, if that's what you're worried about, but I'm a little mentally scarred from seeing someone's dick up your —"

I shoved him off of his chair before he could finish that sentence.

And later that night I told our parents I was gay, leaving out the fact that I had been having frequent sex and that Logan had walked in on me earlier

in the day. I wasn't worried about their reactions to my sexuality and figured if Logan knew, they should too.

For the next two days, my phone had been blowing up from both Spencer and Darren and I was just about sick of it. I did feel guilty about Spencer, but I didn't have it in me to talk to him yet after what happened. But Darren was a different story and he was pissing me off, so I answered his call.

"Can you stop fucking calling me?" I snapped. "You're acting like a psycho."

"You just randomly ended things with me in a text," he angrily replied. "And then ignored me."

"You're being clingy," I told him. "We weren't fucking boyfriends or some shit. You need to get over it."

"You act like a piece of shit sometimes, you know that?" he shot at me. "You act like I'm supposed to know exactly what you want and just cut me out when I can't be exactly how you want me to be.

And with that, he hung up, and I let out a sigh of relief.

It was the first Friday night I had to myself in a while. I usually had them reserved for hookups, as of lately for Darren, but now that I was done with him, I could actually be alone. Until he decided to show up, letting himself right into my house and into my bedroom.

"Seriously?" I asked when I looked over at him. He shut the door and locked it.

"Why have you been ignoring me?" he asked, standing at the end of the bed where I was currently lying down.

"I told you I don't want to hook up anymore," I replied with a shrug. "It's not my fault you got attached. Now get out."

He clenched his jaw and gripped the footboard of the bed, but he didn't leave.

"You sure you're not in the mood right now?" he asked in a low tone. "I know how you get this time of night. You broke things off without a warning. Let's just do it one last time and then I'll be gone."

"No. Look, I had fun with you, I really did," I continued. "But I'm trying things with Spencer now and it's going to be exclusive. As in, just him." If he wasn't absolutely pissed at me for ignoring him for two days.

I stood up from the bed, going over to Darren to try to guide him out of the room.

When I looked into Darren's eyes, I didn't recognize him. His eyes were dark, like his pupils took up the whole thing. They were animalistic, angry, and trained on me. I was startled by the expression, stopping my hand in mid air just before I was about to touch his arm.

"I knew you were fucking him behind my back," Darren hissed. Even his voice sounded different than I had ever heard it. Alarms went off in my head, telling me to get out of there, but I stayed frozen in place.

Darren grabbed me and shoved me against the wall. I was too shocked to react or fight back. He looked angrier than I had ever seen him, like he had been wronged in so many ways.

"You are pathetic," he spat, gripping me tighter. There were times I welcomed his tight grip, liking the feeling of it. This was not one of those times. "That little shit has been in love with you this whole time and you're just going to give him what he wants because you're bored. And once you're bored of him, you'll drop him too."

"Darren—"

He brought his face closer to mine and I tried to look away but I couldn't.

"How would he feel if I fucked you right now?" he hissed and I tried to get out of his grip. "Now that you two are so exclusive *with each other. If I fucked you right now, he would hate you."*

"Stop," I said, but my voice was weak.

"You owe me one last time, Vinny," he said, his voice low, hissing, venomous. "You think Spencer's so much better than me? You think he'll fuck you as good as I do? He won't. And I'll prove it."

My whole body was shaking. I tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but he was too strong for me. Darren brought me over to the bed and threw me face down, holding me to the mattress.

And I was frozen after that.

My body ached long after Darren had left. I had been discarded like a piece of trash, Darren not even looking back as he left the room.

I stayed in that position, silent tears leaking out of my eyes, for what felt like an eternity. I heard Logan and and my parents downstairs, but I didn't move.

My mind was blank. I was frozen. I couldn't think, didn't know what to think.

It wasn't until I knew my family was asleep that I was able to roll over onto my back. I quickly stood up, the pain in my backside unbearable. My eyes had unlimited tears as a continuous stream leaked down my face.

I pulled my pants up and pulled some shoes on and went straight to Spencer's house. I needed to see him. He would help me, comfort me.

The air of the night made the tears on my cheeks freeze my skin. That was the least of my worries. My feet knew the way to Spencer's better than my mind did and I was there before I even realized.

I knocked on the front door, not even thinking about how late it was.

When Spencer opened the door, with Marina behind him, he didn't look happy to see me.

"Am I finally worthy of your presence?" he asked.

"Spence," I said, my voice breaking. "I'm sorry. I was at home tonight and Darren—"

"Oh, you were with Darren because of course you were!" Spencer exclaimed, startling even Marina.

"You don't understand—"

"I don't understand what, Vinny?" Spencer hissed. "That you were with Darren after you told me you wouldn't be? That you ghosted me for two days after we hooked up? That you're a fucking liar who only wants me for sex?"

"Spence, no," I said, more tears falling. "Marina, please."

"Vin, he has every right to be angry with you right now," she said, though it looked like it hurt her to say it. "You hurt him. You ignored him for two days just to show up in the middle of the night?"

"You told me you were done with Darren!" Spencer exclaimed. "You fucking lied. You don't care about me. All you care about is sex and you can get that from anyone so why don't you just get the fuck out of here!"

My vision was blurring from the tears. Spencer shook his head at me, a look of disgust on his face before he slammed the door shut.

And that was when I crumbled. I sobbed on the ground, curling myself into a ball. I ignored the pain in my body as I wept into the grass.

He looked at me with disgust. I was disgusting.

I had thought maybe one of them would come outside, but they never did. And I stayed there all night, throbbing in pain, my face raw from crying, and hating myself.

*

All I could hear was Spencer's cries on the phone.

"Spence?" I said.

"Yeah?" he sniffled.

"Can you come over?"

**

Hey everyone thanks for reading. That was a long one!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! Hadley's reaction? How do you think the school is going to handle this? The flashbacks?

51

Vinny Taylor

I never thought I would see Spencer and Marina at my house again, but there they stood in front of me as I opened the front door. I had asked Spencer to bring Marina with him before we ended our phone conversation. Spencer's eyes still looked red from crying during our conversation. I wasn't sure how much he had told Marina before arriving, but she held a myriad of emotions in her expression.

"Well," I said, pausing for a moment as I looked at them. "Come in."

They followed me into the house and the two of them sat on the loveseat while I sat down on the arm of the couch.

"So, I, uh, assume you both saw the video going around," I said, looking down at the floor.

"Yeah, we did," Marina replied in a soft tone.

"Vinny, I feel like a fucking idiot," Spencer blurted, causing me to look up at him. His eyes were wide and glossy, his hair messed up at the top like he had been pulling at the strands. He looked distressed and tired.

"Spence..."

I didn't know what to say to him. He was my best friend at one point, and part of me wanted to have him back as that. That was why I wanted them to come here in the first place. But I couldn't forget how much pain I was in that night they left me outside. It had been so long ago, but maybe part of healing from that and moving on was fixing my relationship with them.

I didn't exactly know how to tell him that Seth had threatened me if he had seen me talking with anyone, that I *couldn't* talk to him even if I wanted to after what had happened.

"I was too mad to realize you needed me," Spencer continued. "Too mad to think clearly and see that something was *wrong*. I'm such an idiot for that."

"We both are," Marina said with sad eyes. "And the fact that we couldn't figure out why you wouldn't talk to us makes us even bigger idiots."

I wanted to hide myself from them. I was feeling vulnerable and I didn't want them to see it. But this was the point of them being here, to open up to them, to fix this, to let myself start to heal.

"I just... I don't want to feel alone," I muttered, looking away from them. "Like I felt that night, like I felt all summer."

Up until Carson came into my life. Then I didn't feel so alone anymore, and I still didn't. I knew that even though we had broken up, I still had him. I didn't lose him in every way. And I had Logan, and my parents, even Dana. But I wanted Spencer and Marina too.

Spencer stood up from the couch and stood in front of me, hesitating for a moment before placing his hand on my shoulder. I looked up at his frowning face.

"I don't want you to feel like that either because it's not true," Spencer said in a low voice. "You're not alone and I'm sorry I wasn't better to you."

It was only a start, but his words made me feel better. I was tired of being angry and sad all the time, tired of resenting him and Marina, but I was still uncomfortable. It was like it had been a life time since I had let them in, since I had been so open and vulnerable with them. Carson was the only one I could do this with now, outside of therapy. Part of me still worried Spencer and Marina would judge me or blame me for what had happened.

I wanted to see Carson and I didn't know if I should want to see him. Or if he even wanted to see me.

"Are you okay?" Marina asked after a few moments of silence. "Did Seth injure you?"

I absentmindedly touched my neck. "I'm fine."

There was another long silence between us then.

"Can we just..." I trailed, then started over. "I asked you guys to come here because I wanted my friends I guess. We don't have to keep talking about depressing shit. Can we just... hang out?"

Spencer moved toward me, then hesitated with a contemplative look on his face. It was like he wasn't sure how close he could get to me, what would be too much for me. So I reached out and pulled him to me in an embrace. He was stiff for a moment then melted into my touch, wrapping his arms around me tightly.

It was strange. I was never much of a hugger, but that could change.

We pulled away after a few moments, Marina smiling over at us.

"So, uh, you and Isaac huh?" I awkwardly let out and Spencer let out a short laugh.

"Yeah, me and Isaac," he replied with a smile. And it was good to see him smiling about someone else, good to see not only has he moved on from me but he was happy with Isaac.

"They just made it official," Marina added, her grin widening.

"Really?" I asked and Spencer nodded.

"We'll see how it goes," he said, seeming to finish the conversation at that.

I was glad he didn't ask me about Carson. I didn't want to have to tell them that we broke up, though Spencer might have already known

The three of us spent some time watching TV. It was awkward and quiet, but I didn't expect things to go back to normal. For the moment, I was just content with having friends of my own so that I didn't have to be alone or rely on Logan or Carson.

Just the mere thought of Carson seemed to make him appear. He pulled up to the house with Archie, Isaac, Dana, and Hadley. Hadley was about the second to last person I wanted to see at the moment. If she knew about Darren, which I was sure she did, I couldn't imagine she would want to see me either.

Carson stopped short when he entered the house, looking at Spencer and Marina then back at me. A split second later he was rushing over to me.

"Vinny," he said as he scurried to the couch. "Are you okay?" He kneeled before me and took my face in his hands and I wanted to cry at the look on his face.

He looked so concerned, like he was looking for any lingering injuries. His eyes stopped on the bruises on my neck as he rubbed his thumb over my cheek.

"I'm fine," I assured him, placing my hand over one of his that still rested on my face. And at that moment, I did feel fine. With him there. Even with his friends looking on.

I glanced over Carson's shoulder and saw Hadley looking at me with red rimmed eyes. Archie stood beside her with a guilty look on his face, his eyes everywhere in the room but me.

I wanted to close myself back up in my mind. There was now an audience in the house. I didn't want them to see me vulnerable, only Carson.

"Logan!" Dana called out walking over to shout up the stairs. He came running down the steps and stopped short when he saw that all of his friends were in the living room.

"What are you guys doing here?" he asked, greeting Dana at the bottom of the stairs with a kiss.

Carson stood up. "Checking on you. And Vinny."

He looked down at me and Spencer stood up from the couch to greet Isaac, allowing Carson to sit down next to me.

At that moment, I didn't care that Carson and I were broken up, or that we had an audience. I pulled his arm around me and curled into his side, putting my arm around his waist. I nearly sighed in relief when he pulled me closer instead of rejecting my touch.

"You look really bad," Dana told her boyfriend, placing a hand on his injured face.

"I know," he said, his eyes drifting over to Hadley.

It was like no one wanted to be the first say anything about what had gone on today, about what everyone now knew had happened to me.

Hadley let out a heavy sigh and ran a hand down her face.

"Vinny, can I talk to you?" she asked, her voice shaking. "Alone."

I wanted to tell her no without giving away the fact that I couldn't look at her without being crushed under guilt. But with everyone around, I couldn't do that without looking like a complete ass.

"You don't have to," Carson whispered, his lips touching my ear.

And I almost said no, but then I looked at Hadley. And she looked so broken and I couldn't her. So I nodded and stood up from the couch, pulling out of Carson's warm embrace and led her into the kitchen.

She took a deep breath as I looked down at the floor.

"I wanna say I'm really sorry," she started, causing me to glance up at her. This was not how I expected this conversation to go.

"For what?"

"For... being with Darren, bringing him around," she said, her eyes tearing up. "Logan had always had a bad feeling about him and I didn't listen. He

came here, hung around with us. I can't even imagine how it felt knowing there was a possibility he would be here. I'm just... I'm sorry."

I shrugged. "You didn't know."

It would be unfair for me to blame Hadley for anything. It was me who didn't say anything and I knew exactly how kind and charming Darren could act. He could fool anyone.

"I know," she replied. "It still feels shitty though."

She looked like she wanted me to say something, but I didn't know what. I just wanted this conversation to be over.

"I don't, like, blame you or whatever," I said. "For bringing him around." I couldn't find it in me to tell her about my guilt.

She nodded. "Well, thank you." She paused. "I'm going to break up with him, obviously."

"Okay."

"And..." she trailed. "I want you to know I believe you. I believe what happened to you. No matter what anyone else says about it."

That got me thinking about the rumors at school. Who knew what people were saying, the ways they were twisting the story even with the video.

Hadley shot me a weak smile and the two of us made our way back into the living room, walking in on the middle of a conversation.

"—but if you want to do that, we're going to have to figure out where to hide the body," Archie said to Logan.

"Stop it, Arch," Logan snapped, his eyes glancing to me as I entered the room. "I'm not seriously considering murder as an option."

"All I'm saying is I wouldn't blame you and I might actually help you," Archie replied with a shrug, still seeming to keep his eyes off of me.

I found my way back to Carson, debating whether I should try to get him alone. I didn't know if he would want to be just with me, and I didn't want to be rejected in front of everyone. He put his arm around me like it was the most natural thing in the world and I relaxed into his side.

"Are you okay?" Carson asked, muttering low enough so that only I could hear him. "Do you want to leave?"

Carson may have felt like he knew nothing about me, but he knew me well. He could read me, could tell how I was feeling and what I was thinking just by being around me.

"Let's take Luna for a walk," I suggested, standing up from the couch to go find the dog.

Once I had her on her leash, I walked back to the living room where Carson must have already told everyone we were leaving. I said goodbye to Spencer and Marina and tried not to feel guilty about leaving them with all of Logan's friends after I was the one that asked them to go over. But I wasn't passing up alone time with Carson, not when I needed him and wasn't sure when I'd have another chance like this again.

"Now can you tell me if you're actually doing alright?" Carson asked once we were outside.

"I'm..." I trailed. I couldn't find the right word. I was fine, but I wasn't. "I'm not as bad as I could be." That answer seemed to be the one that fit the most to what I was feeling.

Carson seemed to understand that and nodded at me.

"I'm overwhelmed, and..." I didn't want to say it. And if this was anyone else, I wouldn't, but it was Carson. "And scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Scared of... everything," I said. "Of people knowing, of Seth and Darren and whatever they're going to do to me."

"They're not doing anything to you," Carson said, his voice in a sharpened tone I wasn't used to hearing from him. "They're not getting near you."

"They'll find a way if they really want to."

"Vinny, I—" Carson paused and took a breath. "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you the other day. This was what you were going to tell me, wasn't it? About Darren?"

I looked over at Luna and her happy trotting as she walked beside me, then I slowly brought my eyes back to Carson. He felt guilty, I could tell. And I hated that he felt that way.

"It wouldn't have mattered," I told him and continued before he could say anything else. "And it shouldn't have. I just wanted you to understand, not guilt you into staying with me when you were unhappy."

"That was part of the issue though," Carson replied. "That I didn't understand you. I should have just let you tell me."

"But it doesn't change anything," I told him. "I'm still traumatized by it. I'll still act out and hurt you without meaning to. Just because you know why doesn't mean it would be okay."

I never thought I would be back to telling Carson how I wasn't good for him. I wanted him to feel secure with his decision to break up with me, not feel guilty about it. Because he was right for doing it and even with him knowing about what happened with Darren, it didn't change anything.

"What are you going to do? About Darren?" Carson asked, not responding to my previous statement.

I let out a sigh. "I don't fucking know. There's nothing I can do, really. Dad is really adamant about pressing charges though. I don't know if he'll budge."

"And you don't want to do that?"

"I don't think it's worth it," I replied. "I mean, well, it'd be worth it if it worked out. That way I wouldn't have to worry about him hurting me. And he wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else. But there's no proof."

"Maybe just getting the accusation out there is enough," Carson suggested. "You could get a restraining order and if people know about him being accused, they could know to stay away."

"Maybe," I sighed again. "I just don't want to have to deal with him in court or whatever. Or having to go over it again and again with police and lawyers and judges."

Carson nodded.

"And I guess I don't want to have to relive it or have to listen to people say they don't believe me or thinking I'm lying or whatever," I said.

I could only admit this because it was Carson, but I didn't think I would be able to handle a bunch of people calling me a liar or openly siding with Darren. It was bad enough that it was going to happen at school. If I ended up having to go to court with everything, it would be on a much larger scale.

"Well, with whatever you decide to do, just know I'll be right here," he said with a smile. "Beside you. Through all of it."

And that seemed like the best thing to hear at that moment.

**

Hey everyone thanks for reading!!

Let me know what you thought of the chapter. Do you think Vinny should rekindle his friendship with Spencer and Marina?

Also, I currently have no idea how many chapters are left. I'm just going with vibes.

52

TRIGGER WARNING: mentions sexual assault/rape

Vinny Taylor

After being pulled out of school by Dad for the next two days, I had enough of staying home with Logan for his suspension. He had been annoying and whiny and constantly bugging me, so now that he was going back to school for his in-school suspension, I wouldn't have to deal with him.

Dad had said he was going to take Thursday and Friday off from work to stay home with me, but that would have been even worse than staying home with Logan, I imagined. So I told him I had to suck it up and go to school because, surely, all the talking had blown over.

But when I asked Carson about it the night before as the two of us walked through the park, that wasn't what it seemed like.

"People are still talking about it?" I asked, stuffing my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching out to grab his.

He grimaced as he nodded in confirmation. "Yeah, I mean it's not all bad. A lot of people believe what Darren did to you. And a lot of people are giving Seth shit for what he did in the locker room."

"He's still at school?"

"In-school suspension," Carson replied. "I guess he's getting at home suspension tomorrow and Friday. They wanted to keep him and Logan separated. I heard that he was going to get in-school suspension for the whole week, but Vice Principal O'Neil fought to give him something worse."

"I think if it were up to her, she'd expel him," I said. She was the only person who kept that school somewhat fair. She didn't care at all about

someone's status as a football player and the jocks absolutely hated her for it.

"Up to her or anyone other than Principal Williams," Carson responded, letting out a deep breath and sending a cloud above us.

It was almost December now, but the two of us still wore only sweatshirts. I had my hood up, shivering as we walked. Without seeming to think about it, Carson put his arm around me and pulled me close to him, giving me the warmth of his body. It was hard to think that the two of us weren't together anymore. Especially when he did things like this.

I didn't want to ask it. I almost didn't want to know. But then I did.

"Has Darren been there?" I asked, a shiver going through my body.

"He has, but I haven't seen much of him," Carson replied, pulling me tighter to his body. "He's been kinda keeping a low profile. I don't know if he'll show up with you and Logan coming back tomorrow."

"He hasn't done anything?"

Carson shook his head. "He's been pretty much staying with the football team. I haven't seen him at lunch. I don't even know if he's going to his classes."

That somehow made me more nervous to go back tomorrow, knowing Darren was just walking around in the background and going unnoticed.

"I can walk you to your classes if you want," Carson offered, noticing my discomfort. "So you don't have to be alone."

Part of me wanted to say no, thinking I would be burdening him with taking care of me while we weren't even together. But the other part wanted to spend as much time with Carson as possible, and knew that I would have a hard time at school knowing there was a chance I could be caught alone by Darren or one of his friends.

"Okay," I said and smiled up at him.

It turned out I didn't even need Carson to walk me to class because as soon as I entered the building, I was called into the Principal's office.

I sat down in the uncomfortable chair in front of Principal Williams' desk as he sat across from me in his chair. He didn't say anything to me other than telling me to sit down. It was like he was waiting for someone else to appear. Probably Vice Principal O'Neil.

She entered the room a few moments later, but the person that followed her caused my breath to hitch in my throat and my hands to grip the arms of the chair like I was trying to rip through them.

Darren walked in behind her, his head held up straight and a blank expression on his face. He sat down in the chair next to me and out of the corner of my eye, I saw him glance in my direction as I sat rigidly in my seat.

I felt nauseous despite knowing that he couldn't do anything to me with the two adults in the room. But just his presence was enough to rattle me. I fought the urge to bolt out of the room and out of the school entirely. Him being here made everything play back in my head. Even the smell of him from that night was the same and any time I smelled that cologne, I wanted to vomit.

The bell signaling the start of first period went off and that was when Principal Williams finally spoke.

"Now we can begin," he said, leaning forward in his chair and resting his clasped hands on his desk. "Usually I don't get involved with the rumor mill in this school, but there are some pretty serious accusations going around."

Vice Principal O'Neil stood beside his desk, her arms crossed with an angry expression on her face. I couldn't tell if that was directed at us or the principal.

"I'll cut to the chase," he continued. "There's a video going around from the locker room and now there are rape accusations concerning the two of you and I'd like you to set the record straight."

It was like he had already decided the accusations were false and just wanted to hear it from us so the school wouldn't have to get involved.

But I couldn't speak. My throat dried out with Darren beside me and his eyes searching my face. I didn't notice I was shaking until I felt his gaze on me again.

"I don't understand what you're asking," Darren said, his voice small yet clear.

"I want you to tell me if there are any truth to these accusations or if they're false so we can put an end to this," Principal Williams responded in a hard tone.

Before Darren could respond, I let out a breath and finally spoke.

"Call my dad," I said, my tone breathy and rushed. "Call my dad to come here."

Principal Williams looked over at me, his expression slightly irritated at my request. But he let out a sigh and nodded, pulling something up on his computer before dialing on the phone.

I wanted to shrink and disappear into nothing. Anything to get Darren to stop looking at me.

Principal Williams called both mine and Darren's father. None of us said anything as we waited for the men to arrive.

Dad was there in record time, bursting into the office and coming to my side, standing between Darren and me.

"What is going on here?" Dad demanded to Principal Williams. "What has my son done to be in here? With him?"

Dad shot a nasty glare down at Darren.

"Mr. Taylor, we'll begin once Mr. Sanderson arrives," Principal Williams said. "I'll have someone grab you a chair."

"You should have *never* brought him in here without calling me," Dad spat.

One of the office assistants brought in two chairs, placing on on my right and the other on the other side of Darren. Dad pulled the chair intended for him over between Darren and me and sat down.

"Vinny, are you alright?" he asked me quietly, placing his hand on my shoulder.

"Talk later," I told him in a low tone.

I didn't want to say anything in front of Principal Williams, not when he already thought me to be a liar.

Dad nodded just as Darren's father entered the room in a suit and a pinched expression on his face.

"What is going on?" Mr. Sanderson asked, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Sanderson," Principal Williams said as Vice Principal O'Neil shut the door.

Darren's father sat down beside him, leaning forward in his chair as he shot his son a questioning glance.

"As I was telling the boys, there are serious accusations concerning the two of them," Principal Williams started. "And I would just like to get to the bottom of it."

That wasn't how he phrased it before when it was just the two of us, when our fathers weren't here to make him say what he really meant.

"What exactly are these accusations?" Mr. Sanderson asked.

"There is a video going around the school in which your son is accused of sexually assaulting Vinny Taylor," Principal Williams explained plainly.

"Well, that's just obviously not true," Mr. Sanderson replied.

I almost felt bad for the guy when I saw the look on Dad's face as he turned to the man. It was a look of pure fiery rage that I had never seen on him before.

"Your son raped my kid," Dad snapped, not even trying to put a cap on his anger.

"And why would he do that?" Mr. Sanderson challenged in an almost mocking tone. "Not only would Darren never do that, but he isn't gay."

"I don't give a *fuck* about what you think about your son," Dad hissed. "But *my* son says he raped him. And I believe that."

"Well, *my* son says he didn't."

"Your son actually hasn't said anything," Dad replied, looking down at Darren.

Principal Williams tried to interrupt them, but the two men wouldn't back down.

Mr. Sanderson sighed. "Look, I'm sorry about what happened to your son, truly, but it wasn't Darren. Maybe he's just confused. Trauma can do that to someone."

"He's not confused!"

"It is *impossible* that my son did this!" Mr. Sanderson shot back. "He's straight, he has a girlfriend. He wouldn't touch your son sexually!"

Dad was about to finally blow up before Darren spoke up.

"Actually, Dad, I'm not straight," Darren admitted, causing his father's eyes to widen. "And Vinny and I did have a relationship over the summer."

Dad's jaw clenched and I knew he was doing his best to hold back from screaming at him.

Mr. Sanderson let out a deep breath. "Okay..."

"It was a mainly sexual relationship," Darren continued. "But I don't recall ever raping him."

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding and I felt a sob fighting to rip through my throat.

"See," Mr. Sanderson said. "Maybe he was just confused about a situation they were in and he thought it was rape when it wasn't."

" *No,"* Dad said, rage in his tone. "Vinny is not confused. He knows what happened to him and I'm not going to let you sit here and call him a fucking liar!"

"Like you're doing to my son right now?"

"That's because he is lying!"

" *Enough!* " Principal Williams interjected. "I want you both to take your sons home for the rest of the day and tomorrow. Monday, I need an answer as to whether there are going to be charges pressed and an investigation."

"There will be *no* —" Mr. Sanderson started, but Dad cut him off.

"That isn't for you to decide, is it?" Dad asked. "Come on, Vinny, let's go."

I couldn't rush out of there fast enough.

***

Carson Hughes

A white hot rage consumed my vision as Vinny told me the events of his day as the two of us laid together in my bed.

"Why would they think it's okay to bring you two in there together?" I asked.

Vinny shrugged against me, burying his face in my chest.

"I guess he thought we would both just deny it."

The thought of Vinny having to face Darren, sit so close to him and be questioned about what had happened between them made me want to march into Principal Williams' office the next day and give him a piece of my mind.

But I wouldn't voice that to Vinny. As soon as he got to my house, his body had melted into mine. All he needed was comfort in what was otherwise a stressful day. And I wanted to be the one that gave that to him. No matter the status of our relationship.

"Will you have sex with me?" Vinny suddenly asked and I jolted at his words.

They came out of nowhere with no warning. My heart started pounding and I was beginning to think I had just made up what he said in my head.

"What?"

"Will you have sex with me?" he repeated.

"Why are you asking me that?"

Vinny sighed and hid his face from me, turning so that I was holding him from behind.

"I'm sick of Darren ruling my life," Vinny admitted, his tone filled with annoyance, though I knew it wasn't directed at me. "Today, I barely speak in his presence. I was *shaking* . And I'm sick of it. I'm sick of the fact that he's the last person that I've done it with and that he's the reason I *can't* do it with you. I'm just sick of it!"

Vinny's voice got louder as he went on and my heart ached for him. I couldn't imagine how he felt, unable to choose what to do with his body because his body made that choice for him due to the trauma he experienced.

"Of course, I would... have sex with you," I assured him. "But I'm not— I can't do it if you're not a hundred percent willing. I can't just power through it because you tell me you're fine even though I know you're not. I won't do that."

"I know you won't. I trust you."

Those words seemed like they could solve all our problems. What we lacked so much in our relationship was communication and trust. Now we had both of those things, yet we weren't together.

It wasn't lost on me that Vinny hadn't suggested we get back together in his request. Not that I felt like I was owed that. But it made it abundantly clear where we stood. We were in this in between phase. He didn't know what he wanted, but I knew that I wanted him back. But I was too scared to admit it, too afraid of being rejected.

"Are you asking to do that right now?" I asked him.

He pondered on it for a moment, turning to face me so that our lips were almost touching. I could feel his steady breath on my face, could feel his body relaxing against mine. Where he was comfortable and content with our position, trusting me to hold him so close.

"No, not now," he said after a few moments. "A day when I'm less emotional. Which might be never."

I laughed, brushing his hair back on his forehead.

I was just happy to have him there, with me, recognizing his emotions and knowing when he wasn't ready for something.

"You know, I'm proud of you," I told him. "For how you're dealing with everything, how you're coping. I just want you to know that."

He glanced down at my lips and then back to my eyes.

"I haven't had a cigarette since I went to Robbie's," he told me and I let out a small laugh again.

He was never good at taking praise.

"I'm proud of you for that too."

His face flushed. "Stop."

"Would it be okay if I kissed you?"

He stopped for a moment, his eyes on my lips again.

"Yes."

And so I did.

**

Hey everyone thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought about the chapter! The scene with Darren? Vinny and Carson afterwards?

I know I said I was just going with vibes but I'm thinking like 5 more chapters maybe? Idk. At this point I'm just trying to get the end I planned out and we'll see how long that takes.

53

Carson Hughes

Isaac's glare told me all I needed to know.

"I think you're setting yourself, and him, up for disappointment," he said.

I had just told him about how I spent Thursday afternoon with Vinny, and that the two of us spent a lot of that time making out in my bed. Needless to say, Isaac wasn't pleased to hear that.

I groaned. "I know. I just— I don't know what I want. I want him back, but I'm afraid if we rush back into things, it won't work out."

"It probably won't," he said. He was being brutally honest, but it was what I needed to hear. "And you kissing him and acting like his boyfriend while you aren't isn't going to make things any easier."

The two of us sat on my couch on Friday afternoon, waiting around for the rest of our friends to arrive later on. Archie and Isaac were going to go with Hadley for her to officially break things off with Darren, and Dana was helping her mentally prepare for that.

"Look, what happened to him is really serious," Isaac continued. "And he's vulnerable right now after having that spread to the whole school and I know you want to comfort him because I know how you are, but I think you should be careful with how you choose to comfort him."

Ever since I had been involved with Vinny, I started confiding in Isaac more. I used to confide in Logan with everything, but I couldn't do that when I needed to talk about his brother. And Isaac was always brutally honest with me. He didn't hold back, and even though it sometimes made me feel like shit, I knew that was how I needed him to be.

I didn't even want to bring up the fact that Vinny had asked me to have sex with him, or that I was seriously considering it. I was actually more than seriously considering it. I wanted to do it and I trusted Vinny enough to know when he was ready. He didn't need me trying to tell him that he wasn't.

I knew what Isaac would say to that. He would tell me it was a bad idea and that the two of us would only end up hurt if we went through with it. I knew it was true, but I tried to tell myself I could be content in this in between phase with Vinny, that I didn't need a commitment from him in order to be happy. I didn't know how true that was. Part of me believed it could be, but the other part wasn't so sure.

"What are you going to do when you go see Darren?" I asked, changing the subject.

Isaac's expression darkened.

"Try not to strangle him. Keep him away from Hadley," he replied. He let out a sigh and shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts. "I'm not so sure Archie is going to be able to hold himself back."

"Don't let him cause bigger problems," I said, leaning back in my seat.

"I'm hoping Darren just doesn't make a fuss about it," Isaac replied. "He should know this is coming. Hadley hasn't talked to him since everything went down and from what I understand, he hasn't tried to seek her out at all. He probably knows where she stands on the whole thing."

I wasn't too convinced he would be a good sport about being dumped in front of an audience meant to protect the person dumping him because nobody trusted him. That alone put me on edge, thinking Darren would try something when we least expected it.

That was the thing with Darren; none of us suspected anything about him. He always seemed so normal and kind and so good to Hadley. But that just showed you could never trust what you saw on the surface. There would

always be something lingering underneath, hiding away and waiting to appear for when you never saw it coming.

Beneath the surface, Darren was a monster. We all knew that now, but who knew how long it would have been before he showed his true colors to Hadley, when he became angry enough at her that he showed the possessiveness, the anger that lingered within him.

I didn't want to think about that. I didn't want to think about him at all.

It was only a little while later that Hadley, Dana, and Archie showed up to my house. Hadley looked like she had been crying, but she wore a brave face when she stood in front of me, her shoulders squared and straightening her posture. She didn't need to say it but, she was ready to face Darren.

We carefully avoided the topic of Darren when Hadley arrived. She had no doubt been talking about him all afternoon with Dana. She didn't need to listen to us talk about him just before she was going to face him for the last time.

"Has anyone heard from Logan?" Dana asked, sitting down beside me with her hand resting on her stomach. She wasn't even showing yet, but it was like ever since she decided to keep the baby, she would place her hand there as if to remind herself that she would be having a child.

I shook my head. "I thought he would be coming over here with you."

She let out a sigh. "I texted him an hour ago and haven't gotten a response yet."

That wasn't like Logan at all. He would keep any of us waiting on a response from him, but never Dana.

"I'll give him a call," I told her, pulling my phone from my pocket.

The phone rang and rang before ultimately going to voicemail. I didn't bother leaving one. He would never listen to it.

"We gotta get going," Archie said, standing up from the couch. "Hopefully this goes smoothly and I don't have to beat the shit out of Darren. Or hopefully not. I kinda want an excuse to pummel him."

Isaac rolled his eyes, standing beside him. "Don't get too confident. He could probably take both of us."

Archie lightly shoved him in response and then looked to Hadley. She let out a deep breath and then heaved herself off the couch.

"Wish us luck," Hadley said in a dull tone.

"Good luck," Dana and I said in unison

"We'll be here when you get back," Dana told her, standing up to give her a hug before the three of them left the house and it was just the two of us.

"You want me to try Logan again?" I asked her, though I knew she was the person with the best chance of getting him to answer. Dana looked conflicted. It was like she was worried, but felt crazy for feeling that way.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "He's probably just busy."

He was never too busy to answer her. She knew that.

"I'll try Vinny," I said. "They're probably together."

She nodded and I took my phone out again to call Vinny.

His phone went straight to voicemail.

"I'm just being paranoid," Dana said, waving her hand.

I shrugged. "He'll call eventually."

I said that, fully believing it.

That was until we went hours without hearing from him.

***

Vinny Taylor

Logan was annoying the shit out of me, but that wasn't anything new.

"You can go, Logan," I told him with a look of irritation from my place on the couch.

He was standing over me, blocking my view of the TV and telling me how he was supposed to be going to Carson's house but didn't want to leave me home alone. I much preferred not being home alone, and he knew that, but he was being so annoying that it didn't even matter.

Dad was having his first session with his therapist this afternoon and Mom was still at work, leaving Logan and I home with Luna.

"I can just wait for Mom or Dad to get home," he said for about the twentieth time. "If you want me to. I don't want to leave you alone if you don't want to be alone."

"I've already told you it's fine," I said, groaning and leaning my head back on the couch.

"But I don't really believe you."

"Well, I don't need you to babysit me!"

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at me with an annoyed expression.

"You could always come with me to Carson's," he said. "I know you two have been... getting along well."

I groaned.

I may have accidentally let it slip that Carson and I had been making out in his bedroom the day before. I left out the part about me wanting to have sex

with him, but Logan knew all about how I spent my afternoon with Carson and I regretted ever telling him about it.

Although I would love to go make out with Carson, I wouldn't be able to do it with Logan and all his friends there. I wasn't up for seeing them anyway. Especially not Hadley.

"I just..." Logan trailed, letting out a sigh. "Hadley is breaking up with Darren today and it makes me nervous to leave you alone if he's going to be all pissed off."

I didn't even want to think about Darren or his anger or the things he did when he was angry. But now Logan had put the thought in my head that if he was angry enough, or blamed me for Hadley dumping him, he could come seek me out. That was why Logan didn't want us to be here. He wanted to get out of the house in case Darren came looking when Hadley was done with him.

I let out a heavy sigh and heaved myself from the couch to stand in front of Logan.

"Fine," I said. "I'll go with you."

Logan looked relieved as I walked out of the living room and into the hallway to put my shoes on.

The two of us were just about to leave when someone banged on the door. Logan and I shot each other confused looks before we glanced over at the front door, neither of us moving to open it.

Neither of us knew what to think, or who would be banging on our door. It could have been anyone really, but I had a bad feeling causing a pit to form in my stomach. I could tell Logan was feeling the same way. He tended beside me as he stared at the door, keeping away from it as if no one would know we were here if we didn't go near the door.

We stood in silence as the person on the other side banged on the door again, causing Luna to start barking.

"Sh! Luna!" I whispered, calling her over to me.

Luna walked over and sat down beside me.

"What do we do?" Logan whispered, moving closer to me.

"How should I know?"

"Should I answer it?" he asked.

Where we stood in the hallway, we couldn't see out on the porch. We would have to move into the living room to have a view of whoever was there, and if they were as angry with us as their knocking sounded, neither of us wanted to be seen by them.

"What do you think, Logan?" I hissed. "Does that sound like someone that's here for a friendly chat?"

I was sure there was a number of people that were angry enough at me for the moment that could possibly be here. It could be anyone from the football team, but I had a strong feeling I knew exactly who it was.

"Call the cops or something," I said as they banged on the door again.

"For someone knocking on our door?" Logan asked, an incredulous look on his face. "You really think they'll come here for that?"

"I don't know!"

The banging happened again and Luna was getting agitated as she sat beside me. I let out a frustrated sigh and stormed over to the door, unlocking it and ripping it open to reveal Seth on the other side, looking just as angry as he did the day he tried to strangle me.

He pulled me out of the house before I could even think and threw me down off the porch and into the yard. I landed on the ground with a ground, pain shooting up through my side.

Before I could even try to get up, Seth kicked me in the stomach to keep me down.

"Did you think I was done with you?" Seth seethed, leering down at me.

Logan came running outside and tackled Seth to the ground before he could kick me in the stomach again. Seth shoved Logan off of him and threw him hard down on the ground.

"Stay out of this, Logan!" Seth exclaimed, his eyes back on me.

He had that same malicious, animalistic look in his eyes that I saw in Darren's that day in the summer. That look that told me something was really, really wrong.

I scrambled up to my feet, holding my arms out in front of me in an effort to block Seth's attack.

"You ruined everything for us, Vinny," Seth hissed, stalking toward me. "I can't play next week because of you and your big mouth. And Darren has your stupid, fucked up accusation against him that's going to end up getting him benched too."

I wanted to tell him that none of that was my fault, that he and Darren were responsible for their owns actions. But I couldn't speak. Seth didn't look human. He looked like a predator and I was his prey. Logan was still on the ground, either unconscious or in too much pain to move.

"You know what that does to us?" Seth asked as he got closer. "It *ruins* our chances for college ball. You and your big mouth ruined plans that we had for *years* . And I'm going to make you pay for it. Just like I said I would."

Seth lunged at me, gripping the collar of my shirt with one hand while using his other hand to punch me repeatedly in the face. He kneed me in the stomach, causing me to double over in pain as he continued his assault on my face.

I saw Logan slowly rise from the ground, holding his head in one of his hands before rushing over and knocking Seth off of his feet. Seth still had a grip on me that cause me to go falling with him.

Seth turned us over and hit my head down on the ground.

This reminded me too much of what happened in the locker room and I started to panic, struggling beneath him to get out of his grip. Logan was hitting him and kicking him, trying to get him off of me, but none of it worked.

Not until we heard the sirens and the police came, putting the three of us in handcuffs.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading! Sorry this took so long to get out, I had a very busy few weeks!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

54

Vinny Taylor

The last thing I ever expected to happen was to be standing in a holding area at the local police station with Logan, but that was where I was on a Friday night. My head ached, I had dry blood on my face, and I just wanted to go home.

Luckily, the cops had enough sense to keep us separated from Seth. And after we explained to them that Logan and I were brothers and Seth had come to our house uninvited, they let the two of us stay together. At first, I was relieved to have Logan there, but after a while I was wishing they had just held us separately.

Logan let out his fiftieth loud groan of the hour and I was about ready to start punching him. That would get them to separate us and give me some peace and quiet.

"How is it we end up in jail when that psycho was the one that came and attacked you?" Logan asked, letting out yet another groan, and putting his head in his hands.

"Logan, I'm still not going to have an answer to that no matter how many times you ask, so just *shut up* ," I said, trying to keep my voice down.

"Dad should be here by now," Logan replied, ignoring what I had said.

"We don't even know when they called him."

"Is this unlawful imprisonment?" Logan asked, standing up and pacing around the small room. "I can't stay in here any longer."

I rolled my eyes at him. *I* was usually the one freaking out in stressful situations. Now I could see how annoying it was.

"Chill out," I told him with a hard stare. "They already told us they're not keeping us here so just shut up."

" *I can't stay in here any longer* ," he repeated, and I turned to face him as he continued pacing back and forth.

I grabbed him by the shoulders to stop him.

"Logan, you're really pissing me off right now."

I didn't even know how long the two of us had been in there, but it seemed like it had been a while since we talked to the cops about what happened, and they had our injuries tended to. They told us that they brought all three of us into the station because they got a call about what was going on and didn't know whose house it was or who the instigator was.

I wasn't so sure that arresting *all* of us was the best course of action, but I had kept my mouth shut about it. At least I was away from Seth and there was no way he could get to me in here. Or Darren. If things went south with Hadley and he came looking for me, he wouldn't be able to find me. Maybe that was why I wasn't entirely pissed off about being arrested. It was Logan who was pissing me off.

Before he could say anything, the door to our room opened and the cop that had brought us in there stood in the doorway, motioning for us to follow him out.

"Your father is here," he said.

Logan nearly knocked me over in order to get out of that room. I glared at him as I followed.

Dad was talking to another cop when we approached him.

"So, what's happening with the kid that came onto my property and started attacking my kids?" Dad asked, his arms crossed over his chest. "This isn't the first time this Seth has fought with my sons and the school has done next to nothing about it."

"Dad—" I started, but he gave me a look that told me to shut my mouth.

"He will be released to his parents and might be facing some charges after we file the report and if it's decided to prosecute," the officer replied. "If you choose to press charges, he will still be released to his parents."

"Can you decide to prosecute without me pressing charges?"

"Yes, the state can press charges, and they likely will, especially if there is evidence of other incidents," he said.

"There's a video of him choking my son at school," Dad told him. "All over the internet."

"Send it over and we can take it into consideration," the officer said.

"And to be clear, you're not charging my sons with anything?"

The officer shook his head. "No, sir."

"Okay," he said before looking over at Logan and me. "Boys, let's go."

We wordlessly followed Dad out of the police station and into his car. I took the passenger seat while Logan sat behind me.

"Can we ever catch a break?" Dad asked as he started toward home. "I mean seriously, what else is going to happen?"

"I'm beginning to think this is just our lives now," I replied, leaning my head against the window.

Dad nodded in agreement. "We have to talk about what we're going to do about Darren before Monday," he said in a low tone, making it harder for Logan to hear.

I was dreading making this decision but now I had no choice. Principal Williams wanted an answer from us by Monday about whether or not we were pressing charges on Darren. I didn't know what sort of authority he had to give us a deadline like that, but it didn't matter much anyway. If I

decided to press charges, then Principal Williams would be forced to ensure my safety at school. If I didn't, then he'd just do his best to act like it never happened.

"I don't want to," I muttered.

"I know."

As soon as we got home, Logan rushed inside to find his cell phone. I hadn't even noticed I had left mine here, but that was part of the reason Logan was acting so crazy about being stuck at the police station.

"Shit," he cursed, scrolling through his phone.

"What?" I asked him.

"I have a bunch of missed calls from Dana," he said, pressing the phone up to his ear. "Hey, is everything okay?" he asked into the phone, undoubtedly talking to his girlfriend.

I found my own cellphone somewhere in the living room and noticed I had quite a few missed calls and a text from Carson.

From: Carson

Hey. A little worried we can't get in touch with you or Logan. Give me a call when you get this.

"You still at Carson's?" I heard Logan ask. "Okay, I'll be right there." He hung up the phone.

"Are you going to Carson's?" I asked him as he was about to leave.

"Yeah, everyone's there."

"I'm coming with you," I said, pocketing my phone and following him out the door.

"You have calls from Carson?" he asked as we got into his car.

"Yeah."

Logan let out a long sigh. "I *can't wait* to tell Dana I was arrested."

"Just tell her to look at my bruised face," I told him. "She'll feel bad."

"And think I'm heroic for stepping in."

I scoffed. "Seth bulldozed you right over."

"She doesn't have to know that."

Although I had just been attacked at my own home, I felt somewhat lighter knowing Seth had been arrested and was most likely going to face consequences. He wasn't going to be able to come back for me. That was why I could easily talk with Logan.

That, and maybe therapy was actually helping me be rational instead of freaking out over everything that happened to me.

After a few moments of silence, Logan let out a humorless laugh.

"This is just great," he said. "I'm supposed to go with Dana next week to her first appointment and be a good boyfriend and start being a father and I just fucking got arrested."

I couldn't help but laugh at that.

"Fathers get arrested all the time," I told him. "Or get addicted to drugs and neglect you and go to rehab."

"Vin." He glared at me.

"Just saying. Could be worse."

I shouldn't laugh at him because he actually looked like he was in distress, but for once, I wasn't the one acting like this, so I had to laugh

As soon as we arrived at Carson's, Logan was rushing out of the car and into the house to get to his girlfriend and I leisurely walked behind him. Logan was already at Dana's side by the time I walked into the house, everyone turning to be with surprised looks.

"Vinny," Carson said, standing up from his spot on the couch. "What happened with you guys?"

"We got arrested," I told him.

" *Vin* ," Logan hissed, shooting me glare as Dana looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"You got... *arrested* ?" Carson asked, tilting his head to the side slightly.

Archie let out a loud laugh and clapped his hands in front of himself, leaning back in his seat.

"What did you two do?" Archie asked between chuckles.

"We didn't do anything!" Logan said, though he was just trying to assure Dana to stay out of trouble. "Seth came and attacked us and the cops came."

That caused Archie to halt his laughter, his gaze darkening as he processed Logan's words. Carson came over to me and tilted my chin up with his hand, taking in my new bruises.

"I'm fine," I said before he could even ask.

"But these bruises—"

"I'm fine," I repeated softly. "I swear."

Carson stared at me like he was making sure I wasn't lying to him, and I stared back with a light smile.

"Did they arrest Seth?" Hadley asked. I hadn't even noticed she was there.

She was looking at me with a serious expression, though there was no trace of sadness on her face considering what she had done today. She broke up with Darren. She faced him like I couldn't despite seeing him in Principal Williams' office earlier in the week. I sat there and couldn't even look at him, couldn't even speak. I didn't even know what I would say to him if I didn't freeze up in his presence.

I nodded at Hadley. "They did." She looked satisfied with that.

"He might be in some deep shit too," Logan added. "The cops said they could bring charges against him, especially with the video going around."

"The video and him showing up at your house has to be, like, at least four different charges," Isaac replied.

Logan shrugged. "Who knows, but all I know is he's gonna fucking regret all the shit he's pulled when they kick his ass out of school and throw him in juvi."

"If they even do that," I said, rolling my eyes at him.

"They *have* to."

"They don't *have* to do anything," I told him, pulling Carson with me to sit on the couch. He sat next to me, practically on top of me, but I didn't mind. I wanted him this close and even closer. "They might just stick him with community service or something, who fucking knows?"

"You're not going to press charges?" Carson asked me, his hand resting on my thigh.

It seemed like it would be the smart thing to do, but I hated the thought of having to go through all these legal processes if I was the one to press charges. I just wanted the cops to handle it and leave me alone.

Luckily, I didn't have to answer that question because my phone rang. I excused myself from everyone and went up to Carson's room to take the phone call from Dr. Brown.

"Hello?" I answered, shutting the door behind me and sitting on his bed.

"Hi Vinny," she said. "Your dad called and wanted me to check up on you. Everything okay?"

I let out a sigh, but tried not to let myself get too annoyed at my father. This was better than him and I trying to have a heart to heart. We always ended up mad at each other.

"I've had an eventful few days," I admitted.

It felt like I hadn't seen Dr. Brown in a lifetime. So much had happened since the last session. There would be a lot to unpack the next time I saw her, from visiting Robbie to getting attacked by Seth and getting arrested.

"Would you like me to move up our session?" she asked.

"No, it's fine."

"Are you being honest?" she asked.

"Well, it's not fine, but I don't need to move up our session," I amended.

"Okay," she said. "You know you can call me whenever you need, right Vinny?"

"I know."

I had never thought to call Dr. Brown when I was having a rough time. Part of me didn't want to mix therapy with the rest of my life, and having 24/7 access to Dr. Brown would blur that line, but that could be a good thing.

"Would you like to talk about anything?" Dr. Brown asked. "I have all the time you need."

I pondered for a moment.

"Now's not a good time," I ultimately replied.

If we talked now, I would get emotional in Carson's bedroom. I'd rather get emotional in Dr. Browns office where no one else would find out about it.

"It can wait until our next session," I said.

"If you're sure."

"I am," I assured her. "Thank you, Dr. Brown."

"You're welcome, Vinny," she said. "I'll see you next week. Call me if you need anything. I mean it."

With that we said our goodbyes and I slid my phone back into my pocket.

I sat alone on Carson's bed for longer than I thought. He eventually came upstairs and knocked on the door before poking his head in.

"You don't have to knock on your own bedroom door," I told him, motioning for him to come sit beside me.

Carson quickly walked into the room and shut the door behind him, taking the spot next to me on the bed, sitting so close our thighs were touching.

"I didn't want to interrupt anything," he said, moving his hand to rest on my thigh, his eyes cast downward to where he was touching me.

"How did everything go with Hadley and..." I trailed, feeling like I would vomit from even saying his name out loud.

"He wasn't happy apparently," Carson said. "I guess he was more offended that she took Isaac and Archie with her."

"Did he say anything about..."

"I don't know," he replied. "They didn't really talk much about it, just that Darren was unhappy."

That thought filled me with dread, the thought of what Darren was capable of when he was unhappy.

"Remember in the beginning of the school year, before we were together, when I called you from one of his parties and you came to pick us up?" Carson asked. "The night I kissed you?"

"Yeah?"

"I've just been feeling really bad about that lately," Carson admitted. "And I'm sorry for making you do that even though I didn't know."

The truth was I had almost had a panic attack with the thought of going to Darren's house. I had no idea if he was going to approach me, if I was going to have to see him. But I knew I had to go take care of my brother and his friends so none of them ended up taken advantage of or dead in their drunken states.

I remembered my breath hitching in my throat when Carson had told me they were at Darren's. I stopped breathing for a moment and tried thinking of any possible way I could get out of going there, but I had nothing. I had no friends that I could call to go for me, I couldn't tell my parents without getting Logan in trouble, so I had to go. I had only been to Darren's house once, but I remembered the way there like I had gone a hundred times.

By the time I got there, I was glad to see Carson coherent enough to help me get everyone in the car so I could get out of there as soon as possible.

"You don't need to feel bad about that," I told him, placing my hand over his. "About kissing me or having me pick you up."

"I kissed you without your consent and made you go to... his house."

"Carson," I said, turning toward him completely and gripping his hand. "You didn't make me do anything. If that night hadn't happened, I don't know if we would have ever gotten together and the thought of never being with you makes me sick."

The connection I had with Carson was something I had never felt before. I wanted to know him forever, in whatever context he allowed.

"I love you, you know," I said, my voice soft. "Even though I didn't say it when you did, didn't say it ever, I do."

Carson's eyes widened and I leaned in closer to him, hoping he would meet me in the middle and our lips would touch. He didn't, so I pulled away, trying not to let the rejection sting me.

We were saved from having to say anything about it by Logan yelling up the stairs and asking if I was going back home with him and Dana.

I stood from the bed, dropping Carson's hand.

"I better get going," I said, heading toward the door. He stood up and followed me out.

"Vinny," Carson said, grabbing my arm and stopping us just before the stairs. "I—"

"It's fine, Carson, really," I replied, a strained smile on my face. I didn't want to talk about it. It would only make it hurt more.

I gently pulled out of his grasp and walked down the stairs before following Logan and Dana out to the car.

When we got home, my breath stopped in my throat as I took in the scene of Dad standing outside, talking to the last person I would have expected.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Tell me what you thought of the chapter! Who do you think is talking to Jeff?

55

Vinny Taylor

Logan whipped his head back to look at me in the backseat. I briefly glanced at him, then turned my attention back to the front porch where Dad stood in front of Darren's father.

Dana slowly turned around to glance at me, a look of confusion on her face.

Logan wordlessly put the car into reverse, ready to leave, though we had already caught the attention of Dad and Mr. Sanderson.

"Stop," I said to Logan, unbuckling my seatbelt and opening the car door before Logan even had the chance to put the car in park.

He called out for me, but I didn't slow. I made my way to Dad, brushing past Mr. Sanderson, and stood on the the top step of the porch, making myself appear taller so I could look down at him. That at least made me feel like I had a semblance of control over this situation, like I had even little bit of the upper hand.

"It's good that you're here actually," Mr. Sanderson said in a calm tone. "Your father and I were just talking about a deal."

"A deal?" I shot a look at Dad who looked like he was ready to bury Mr. Sanderson in the ground. He looked at him with narrowed eyes, nearly burning him with his gaze.

"He has a proposition for us," Dad explained through gritted teeth. "Though he hasn't gotten to the point yet."

"Are you sure you don't want to have this conversation inside?" Mr. Sanderson asked, gesturing toward the house.

"I don't want you in my house," Dad shut him down, crossing his arms over his chest.

It surprised me that he wasn't trying to get me to go inside, but I assumed this was his way of giving me control about what happened with Darren.

"Okay, we can do this out here," Mr. Sanderson continued. It wasn't until just then that I noticed the stack of papers he held in his hand. "I want to strike a deal with you as outlined in this contract."

He held the contract out and Dad snatched it from
his hand, looking down at it like he was going to read the whole thing right there.

"What is it?" I asked, not taking my eyes off of Mr. Sanderson.

"It's an agreement that you will not press charges against Darren," he explained. "In exchange, Darren will be sent away to finish out his senior year out of state and he will be prohibited from coming within two hundred feet of you."

I was shocked at his words. I frowned over at Dad who was already looking at me.

"And if you need any extra sway, there is monetary compensation for any emotional stress this incident has caused your son," Mr. Sanderson finished.

"We don't need your fucking money," Dad spat. He then looked to me with a softened expression, as if seeing if I agreed with him.

I nodded and we both looked back to Mr. Sanderson.

"We don't need your fucking money," I repeated. "If we agree to this, your son will never come near me again?"

Mr. Sanderson nodded. "So long as you do not press charges and do not make any formal accusations against him."

"So, what, are you going to sue me if I tell people what he did to me?" I asked, raising my eyebrows defiantly.

"You cannot formally accuse him publicly," he said. "Meaning to authorities or to the press. Say Darren gets a career, whether it be in football or somewhere else, and you go to the press to accuse him, then you could be sued. I don't care what you say privately."

"So, what exactly is in it for me then?" I spat. "You're going to send Darren away whether I agree or not because everyone here knows what he did, and you want to make sure he can just run away from all this. You're just making it seem like you're doing me a fucking favor when in reality you're trying to buy my silence."

"If you press charges, you will not win," Mr. Sanderson warned. "I'm not saying it to be harsh, but it's the truth. There is no proof about what you say Darren did to you and you do not have the lawyers or the resources I have. All you'll do is create a big headache for yourself and end up with nothing to show for it."

I knew he was right, and I knew it all along. It would be more of a headache for me to go through with pressing charges. I would have to go through the investigation, have to tell the same story over and over again and relive that moment. And I was sure Mr. Sanderson wouldn't make it easy on me. He had the lawyers, the connections, and the money to make sure nothing would come of it. I would probably be worse off when it was all said and done.

Dad and I were silent as we continued glaring at Mr. Sanderson. He let out a sigh and turned to leave.

"I'll leave the contract with you. I suggest you hire a lawyer to look it over before you make your decision," he said, and then he was walking down the driveway and back to his car, passing by Logan and Dana.

The two of them didn't get out of the car until Mr. Sanderson was gone. Logan rushed up with a look of confusion.

"What the hell was that all about?" he asked, looking between Dad and me before his eyes landed on the papers in Dad's hand.

"It was just a load of bullshit," Dad replied with a scoff, turning to walk back into the house. I followed behind him.

"Do you see it now?" I asked him. He continued walking and I was on his heels. "Do you see how there's nothing we can do about this. Darren's dad is going to fight us if we try to do anything and he's going to make everything worse for me! Do you see that now?"

"Yes, Vinny, I get it," Dad said in a hard tone, stopping and turning to face me. "But it's really fucking hard for me to let all this go. I can't just accept that there's nothing I can do to make this better for you."

"Well, you have to," I told him. "I accepted it a long time ago."

With that I jogged upstairs to my room and shut the door behind me, leaning back against it.

My eyes scanned my room as if I was expecting to find something wrong with it. I locked the door behind me but didn't move away from it. I could have stayed like that for hours or minutes. I didn't know and time moved all the same.

Once I was sure Darren's dad was truly gone, and I wouldn't be getting any unexpected visitors, I moved away from the door and got into bed.

***

Carson Hughes

It was just Isaac and I left at my house after all the others left and I could tell he knew something had gone on with Vinny while we were alone. I had listened to his warnings he had voiced to me before about not acting like Vinny's boyfriend to stop us both from getting hurt. But trying to put a stop to that seemed to hurt just as bad. Now Vinny was feeling rejected and I

was missing him even though I pushed him away. It was a lose-lose situation.

It felt selfish to feel this way while Vinny was going through so much, but I couldn't help it. Being with him hurt but being away from him hurt more and in a different way. This wouldn't feel so complicated if the two of us didn't love each other the way we did. I loved him enough to want him to decide what was next for us, what he was comfortable with and what was best for him. I would just have to wait.

"So," Isaac started.

"Can we just not talk about anything that has happened in the last week?" I asked, cutting off his next words before he had a chance to throw them out at me.

Isaac grinned, though it didn't meet his eyes. "Sure. What do you suggest then?"

I was at a loss at that. Part of me felt like I didn't really know myself. I couldn't even think of what I liked to do outside of hang out with my friends or be with Vinny and right now the only option I had was to be with Isaac and I couldn't even think of anything that I wanted to do.

"We could go Christmas shopping," Isaac suggested. "I have to get things for my siblings and my parents and now Spencer and I haven't even started."

I nodded at that, though now I only had my mother to buy for.

Isaac drove us in his car toward the mall, Christmas music playing softly on the radio. The parking lot was quite busy when we arrived and Isaac had to park toward the back.

It felt strange to do something as casual as go shopping after everything that had happened in the last week, but it also felt necessary to get out of the house and stop thinking about it so much.

Isaac immediately went toward some toy store in search of something for his younger siblings and I mindlessly followed behind him, my hands shoved into the pockets of my sweatshirt. He looked around at things, even picked a few things up before shaking his head and putting them back on the shelf.

The more I actively tried to clear my mind, the less it worked. Even the chaos of the mall couldn't distract me from thoughts of Vinny.

"This isn't working huh?" Isaac asked as he sipped on a smoothie he had just bought. The two of us walked by numerous stores but didn't go in.

I shook my head at him, taking a sip of my own smoothie.

"You got it bad," Isaac said with a chuckle. "Like, you're so in love with him. Why aren't you guys back together yet if it's mutual?"

I shrugged. "I don't want to rush back into things for him. If he doesn't feel ready, then we're just going to have the same problems we had before."

"True," Isaac replied, nodding in agreement. "Maybe you should tell him that though, that you're waiting for his move. He might just think you don't want him back."

I thought back to earlier today when Vinny told me he loved me. And then I rejected his kiss and caused that look of disappointment on his face. Maybe he was ready and I just wasn't making things any easier for him by being confusing.

"I guess you're right," I told him.

And later that night, after Isaac had dropped me back off at home, I got a text.

From: Vinvin

meet me at our tree?

To: Vinvin
on my way

I didn't waste any time pulling on a jacket and locking the house up before jogging toward the park where Vinny was already waiting for me.

He was wearing the jacket I had given him from when we were still together and he held an unlit cigarette in his hand as he sat up in the tree.

I quickly scaled the tree and sat down next to him, holding onto the branch to keep myself from falling.

"I've been debating on whether or not I should just light this," Vinny told me, twirling the cigarette in his fingers. "But I don't know if I really need it anymore. And I don't carry a lighter on me anyway

He didn't put the cigarette away, but he made no move to actually use it.

"Where did you get it?" I asked, trying to keep emotion out of my tone. Now that I knew he got his cigarettes from Thomas, I couldn't help but feel jealous at the thought of Vinny reaching out to him to get more.

"It was the only one left in a pack I found in my room," he explained before shoving it into his jacket pocket. "I've been really stressed out lately, so I saw it and immediately wanted to use it."

I nodded in understanding.

"Darren's dad came by the house today," he told me and my eyes widened in shock. I gripped the branch harder, feeling the bark dig into the skin on my palm.

"Why?"

"He offered me a deal," Vinny explained. "In exchange for keeping quiet about Darren, he would send him away and make sure he wouldn't be able to come within two hundred feet of me. And he offered money."

I didn't know what to think about that. Vinny didn't seem enthused by the idea.

"I'm not taking it," Vinny said after a few moments of silence. "I can't do it. He'll send Darren away anyway to get him away from all this. I can't sign away my voice. If I ever did want to come forward about what happened... I'm not letting him silence me."

I placed my hand on his leg and Vinny finally looked over at me. He looked down at my hand, then back up at my face.

"Whatever decision you make, it's *yours* ," I told him. "I'm proud of you for doing what's right for you."

Vinny stared at me for a moment then nodded.

"I guess I just needed to hear someone say that," he muttered. "Dad still can't deal with the fact I don't want to press charges. It's exhausting to keep going in circles about it."

"I'll always be proud of you for doing what's right for you," I said. "I told you I'd be right beside you through anything, didn't I?"

Vinny smiled at that. "Yeah, you did."

I smiled back. "Whenever, wherever you need me. I'm there. Promise."

"You're the only one not fighting me on it," he said. "Even my mom is kinda trying to persuade me to press charges. They say they get where I'm coming from but they don't. You're the only one that does."

I could feel my heart swelling in my chest. He thought I was the only one that really got him, what he didn't know was I thought the same about him.

"I just think you know best about what you need to do," I told him. "About everything. Not just the Darren thing."

He seemed to understand where I was going with that.

"Im sorry if I put you in an awkward spot today," he said, looking down at where my hand still rested on his leg.

"You didn't," I assured him. "Vinny, I'm just as confused about where the two of us stand as you are. I don't know if you want to get back together or what, but this in between thing isn't going to work."

"I know it's not."

"I'm sorry if I made you feel rejected today, but it's not because I didn't want to kiss you," I explained. "I just don't want either of us ending up more hurt by this."

"I know," he agreed. "This in between thing... it feels right in the moment and then leaves me more confused afterward."

He flexed his hand before bringing it down over mine. His hand was cold, his touch freezing my skin while burning his.

"I think..." he trailed, looking down at our hands. "I think you're my best friend. And I really don't want to lose you."

Vinny was never good at opening up, but whenever we were here, at the tree, he laid everything out for me. He opened up more than I had ever seen him when we were here. Maybe it was the fact that no one could see or hear us in the tree. Or maybe it was the comfort that this place was ours and whatever was said here could be said in confidence.

"I think you're mine too," I replied and he looked up at me. His hair fell into his face and I reached out to push it back. Vinny shivered at my touch.

"So, friends for now," he said in a low tone, looking away from me like he was scared of my reaction. I felt a blow to my chest but I didn't let it show on my face.

"If that's what you want," I told him. "If that's what's good for your right now."

He still didn't look at me. "Just until I get my shit together I guess. I still have a lot of issues and I don't want to make the same mistakes with you. I don't expect you to wait for me to be ready or anything..."

I smiled at him, placing my hand on his cheek and turning his face so he was looking at me.

"I don't mind."

We didn't end that night with a kiss, but we looked into each other's eyes with so much wanting and love that it made me think this could be enough for now.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading and thanks for your patience. I was sick all last week (not covid) and I couldn't even look at a screen without getting a migraine.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! Were you expecting Darren's dad to be at the house? What about Carson and Vinny's decision to be just friends for now?

I'm thinking 2 more chapters and an epilogue we'll see how it goes.

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Vinny Taylor

The next week at school, Carson was standing at my locker every morning waiting for me. I had told him it wasn't necessary, but I was glad he was doing it anyway. He had been worried that even with both Seth and Darren out of school, some of their friends would be after me for getting them in trouble since it seemed like neither of them would be playing in the championship this week.

So, I was no longer allowed to have lunch in the locker room and was forced to sit with Carson and his friends, not that I minded much. I liked being doted on by Carson. Even Spencer and Marina started sitting with us, though I didn't speak to them much.

Our gym class was strange. Logan and I had been excused for a few days because we had been injured by Seth. Surprisingly, neither of us had a concussion and we were cleared to go back to physical activity relatively soon.

Most of my classmates were walking on eggshells around me. None of them wanted to get too close or say the wrong thing. The football player who had hit Seth in the head to get him off of me that day, Tyler, I had learned was now acting as captain of the football team in the absence of Seth and Darren. He was also the only one there, other than Carson and Logan, that hadn't been acting weird around me.

Coach Bronson had us running laps around the gym and I was at the front as usual. Tyler eventually caught up to me and the two of us ran together side-by-side for about a lap before he started speaking and we slowed down.

"They're keeping Seth in the juvenile detention center," he said, staring straight ahead.

I didn't know why he was telling me that or if he was expecting me to feel guilty about it, but all that information did was make me heave out a big sigh of relief. It felt like a weight had been lifted off of me and one of my clouds of worry had drifted away.

"Good," I said, a hint of challenge in my voice.

"I just thought you should know that," Tyler replied. "So you're not worried about him blindsiding you again. From what I heard, they're holding him there until he has a trial."

"Good," I repeated.

"And Darren's transferring out," he continued. "His dad got him a spot in some private school down south. I think he's hoping to save his football career, but who knows."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Just thought you should know," he answered. "And no one from the team is going to mess with you. Nobody wants to risk not getting to play Friday, but also as captain, I made it clear you're not to be messed with."

That was what finally got me to look at him. We had gone to an even slower jog, and Tyler was still looking straight ahead.

"I don't need you to protect me," I said in a clipped tone.

Tyler laughed. "I'm not. I consider this to be mutually beneficial. You don't get beat up, I don't lose any more players. Most of the guys were getting sick of Seth's shit anyway. They should be grateful that by being his punching bag, you got him locked up."

"Are you expecting me to thank you for having decency?"

He laughed again. "I guess not. I do have a favor to ask though."

"I don't do favors." Not for people like him that thought I owed them something.

"Again, I think this would be mutually beneficial."

"What?"

"You used to run cross country, right?" he asked. I nodded before he continued. "I'm on the track team for the spring and I was hoping you'd consider joining as a runner."

"You want me to run track?"

Tyler nodded. "You don't even have to try out. Coach Bronson is guaranteeing you a spot if you just say yes."

"He put you up to this?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at the coach as we passed him.

"He brought it up to me and I thought it was a good idea," Tyler replied. "Take some time to think on it. The season doesn't start until March. I just thought I'd get it in your head as soon as possible."

With that, Tyler stopped running to go grab some water. I ran up behind Carson and Logan, the two of them being at least a lap behind me.

"Was he messing with you?" Logan asked, out of breath. I rolled my eyes and motioned for the both of them to follow me off to the side for water.

"No, he wasn't messing with me," I said, and then I told them what he had said about Seth and Darren.

"So he gets to just run away?" Logan asked, referring to Darren.

"Don't, Logan," Carson said, shooting him a stern look.

I was grateful for Carson's intervention. He knew how I felt about Darren and knew that I had been expecting him to run off anyway. That much wasn't news to me.

"He also asked me to join track," I added while the two stared at each other. This brought their attention to me, a look of surprise on each of their faces.

"Are you going to do it?" Carson asked me.

I could see the excitement on his face like he wanted this for me so badly. I had quit cross country when I was too depressed to do anything I enjoyed. But I had been making progress, moving forward. And now there was an opportunity for me to be part of something again, part of something other than my little bubble with Carson and my family. And Carson was excited for me and that made me want to say yes instantly.

"I'm going to think about it," I said with a shrug, taking a sip of my water.

"I think you should do it," Logan commented, leaning back against the wall. "You'll be good at it."

"Maybe."

"You three!" Coach Bronson called out, causing all of us to turn our attention to him. "Quit slacking and get running!"

"You better let these two have a longer break unless you want them passing out," I told him, gesturing toward Logan and Caron.

"Get over here, Vinny," Coach Bronson demanded. I walked over to him, and he spoke to me in a hushed tone. "Did Tyler talk to you about running track?"

"He mentioned it."

"I want you to do it," he told me.

"I know you do."

Coach Bronson stared at me with a stern expression.

"Promise me you'll actually consider it," he said after a few moments of silence.

"I will."

And that was the truth. The even better truth was that I had already made up my mind.

***

I was on my way to Carson's house later that night when I felt like I was being watched. I had opted for walking since it was abnormally mild for a December night, but I was beginning to think that I should have just taken my car.

My hands were shoved into my pockets as I looked around the well-lit street. There was a car stopped on the side of the road with its headlights on, so I turned and continued walking with the hope that I would get away from them and make it to Carson's house without any trouble.

But, of course, nothing could be that easy for me.

I grimaced when I heard a car door open and shut, but I didn't turn around. My feet automatically started moving faster without me even having to think about it. When I heard my name, I stopped.

"Vinny," that familiar voice called out. "Vinny, wait up. I didn't mean to scare you."

I slowly turned around and came face-to-face with Darren. He stood about ten feet from me, his hands out in front of him like he was already preparing to have to calm me down.

But I was frozen. I wouldn't be able to charge at him or run away if things got bad. I couldn't move. He was there and that was all I could think about, that the two of us were alone and I couldn't move. He could do anything to me and I couldn't trust that I would be able to protect myself.

Part of me knew that one day, this would happen, that I would have to face him whether I was ready for it or not and the healing happening inside me could never truly be healed without this.

Darren stepped closer to me and took a step back. He didn't come any closer. I didn't even try to hold back my sigh of relief.

"I just want to talk to you," Darren said, still holding his hands out in front of him. "Can we just talk?"

I didn't say anything, but I made no move to flee either. He took that as a yes and continued speaking.

"My dad is sending me away," he said, his voice tight like he was trying to mask his emotions. He was never one to be vulnerable. The only emotion I remember seeing out of him was that paralyzing anger. "I should have known this was coming, that what happened with us this summer would come back to haunt me."

He didn't know that it haunted me all the time, that it never left my mind and I was stuck with it ingrained in my brain. He didn't know the memory of what he did to me would stay with me forever, that I couldn't run away from it like he was about to do. It was now forever part of me, and that was something I was slowly beginning to accept.

"I just want to know what's going through your head, Vinny," Darren continued. He had the nerve to look sympathetic. "Why you're torturing me with this."

That finally got me to speak.

"Torturing you?" I said in a low tone, so low I almost didn't recognize my own voice.

"So you do know how to speak?" he asked, his expression darkening as he narrowed his eyes at me. "Yes, torturing me, not letting me move on. You got my best friend locked up, my girlfriend to breakup with me, all my friends to turn against me, and now you're getting me sent somewhere a thousand miles away just so you don't ruin my life completely. So, yeah, you're *torturing* me with this."

I stared at him with disgust. He truly looked like he thought of himself as the victim in all this as if to wasn't his own actions that brought all of this upon him.

"You are fucking deranged," I spat, suddenly not feeling as scared as I was. "And I feel sorry for you, but not for the reasons you want me to. I feel sorry for you because you completely lack any shred of self awareness and you'll never realize it and that's going to make you lose everyone you'll ever care about because you're too fucking self absorbed to think about anyone other than yourself."

"You don't even care about what you're doing to me," he said with an expression of disbelief. "And you're calling *me* self absorbed?"

"You don't care about what you did to me and how much that is torturing me every day of my life since it happened, so we'll call it even," I replied. "You don't even fucking realize the ways you ruined my life and now you're looking for my sympathy? Fat fucking chance you piece of dog shit."

"One day, the way you treat people is going to come back and bite you in the ass," he hissed.

"It already has. In more ways than one."

The two of us stared at each other for a moment, not saying anything. Part of me believed that this was something we both needed, that I needed to face him to really start healing and Darren needed to face me to truly understand what his anger does. He needed to understand the way his anger made him act and how his actions lingered in every corner of his victim's mind, how it never went away, not even when I slept. There was always this weight on me, the weight of what he did, of how that changed my life and it was something that would never leave me.

I could only hope that he cared about that. It was the only way that no one else would ever be hurt by him the way I was. But as I stared at him, I didn't see anything behind his eyes. No understanding. No remorse. He looked at me like I was crazy, and because of that look, I realized he really didn't care at all.

This meant nothing to him. He came to see me with the intention of getting my sympathy, of making me feel bad for the way that he felt. It was a tactic he used when we were seeing each other and it wasn't one I would ever fall for. I wasn't a very sympathetic person, especially not for him. And I didn't see the good in everyone. I didn't know if I believed that everyone had good in them. I would never be able to find it in Darren, no matter how hard I looked.

"There's a difference between you and me," I started. "We both treat people like shit, but I own up to it and I feel bad about it. You try to bury it. You get yourself convinced that you don't do anything wrong and blame anybody else for the way your actions come back to haunt you. So go have fun wherever the fuck your dad is sending you and never fucking come back here. No one's going to miss you."

With that, I turned and left, speed walking to get to Carson's house. Thankfully, Darren didn't follow me. And hopefully, that would be the last I ever saw of him.

I was breathless when I got to Carson's house and he opened the door with a smile on his face when he realized I arrived.

"You okay?" he asked me, taking in my breathless state.

"I'm good," I said, nodding.

He let me inside and the two of us sat on his couch to watch something on TV. It took everything in me not to reach out for him and wrap his arm around my shoulder. I could tell he was having a similar dilemma by the way he was tapping his hand on his knee.

"Carson," I called out and his attention was instantly on me. "You can put your arm around me if you want." I couldn't even let myself be embarrassed by my bold statement because I knew that was what he wanted.

He hesitated for a moment, but ultimately gave in.

"I guess friends do this," Carson said with a chuckle, pulling me closer to his side.

I grinned up at him and hummed in agreement. "Yeah, all the time."

We spent the rest of the night like that, wrapped up in each other, being so close that nothing could fit between us. And I didn't think about Darren or the words we exchanged for the entire night.

It was like now that I had faced him and let him know exactly what I thought of him, I didn't need to think of him. I faced the guy that had haunted me for too long and now I was no longer scared of him. He was no longer a thought in my head. And now I could just move on and let go.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading. I lied in the last part and NOW there are going to be two more chapters. I wasn't expecting it to go on this long but now the story is winding down and the end is in sight.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

57

TRIGGER WARNING: mention of rape/sexual assault

Carson Hughes

Something my mother pointed out to me not too long ago was the fact that sometimes I care so much about others that I forget to take care of myself. I didn't get what she was talking about at first until I really thought back on my life.

It seemed like I never put myself first. It was always my friends, my mom, Vinny, and never me. Part of that didn't sit right with me, but the other part knew I wouldn't be happy with being selfish, though it wouldn't hurt to start doing things for myself.

I didn't even really know what I liked to do without having anyone else with me. That was what really bothered me when I thought about what my mother said. I felt like I didn't know myself and I wanted that to end. That was why I decided Friday night and Saturday, I was going to spend some time figuring myself.

My friends weren't going to go to the championship football game tonight. Even with Seth and Darren not playing, none of them felt like they could be in the spirit. I felt bad for them, knowing that at least all of them besides Logan really liked going to the games and they were missing out on their last chance because of the bad behaviors of other people.

While they gathered at Logan's house, I sat at home in my lonesome, trying to figure out literally *anything* about myself. I was coming up with nothing, so I sent a text to Vinny.

To: Vinvin
can you tell me something about me

From: Vinvin
what

To: Vinvin
i don't know anything about myself. i don't even know my favorite color

From: Vinvin
your favorite color is dark green

To: Vinvin
wait... you're right how did you know that

From: Vinvin
i know you
it's the color of your favorite t-shirt

To: Vinvin
oh right. the one you never gave back

From: Vinvin
and i never will

I didn't have time to type out a response before Vinny was calling me.

"Hello?"

"Are you having, like, some sort of psychotic break or something?" Vinny asked, his tone rushed.

"No, I'm just thinking," I replied with a sigh. "I'm just sitting here alone and realizing I have no clue about anything about myself."

"Carson, you're like the greatest person I know," Vinny said in a tone that made it sound like he was stating the obvious. I wouldn't even bother arguing against him about that.

"But I don't really know myself," I said. "I don't even know what I want to do with my life. I put Undecided on all my college applications."

"Well, *I* know you, and I know that your favorite color is dark green, and you hate arguing, and you love cuddling, and you're too hard on yourself because you're always so focused on making everyone else happy that you forget to make you happy. Seriously, I think the first thing you've done for yourself in a while was dump me."

I groaned. "Vinny, that last part was not helpful."

"Listen, nobody really knows themselves," Vinny replied. "We always know the worst about ourselves, or what we hate about ourselves, and never the good that other people see. That's what my therapist says at least. I'm paraphrasing."

He continued, "And it's not hard to see the good in you because there's so much of it. You're so kind and considerate of everyone's feelings. You communicate really well, you actually think about what you're saying before you say it and you look at a situation from all sides before you do. If you want to know yourself better, see what others see, start there."

"I guess."

"I gotta go," Vinny rushed out. "I'm running late for therapy and if I'm late, Dad and Dr. Brown are going to be pissed. I can deal with Dad, but not her. I have a lot to talk about with her today."

That instantly filled me with concern. "Is everything okay?"

"Sort of, I don't know," he said. "I'll fill you in later."

"Okay, bye." I was careful not to let *I love you* slip out whenever we ended conversations. It wasn't getting any easier.

"Talk to you later if you're not still trying to sit in solitude."

With that, he hung up. And I was left to myself and my thoughts again.

Maybe Vinny was right. Maybe I would never actually know myself because I would never be able to see what others see. But maybe if I took

those traits Vinny told me about, I could apply them to something else that would help me understand them better.

But maybe this was just who I was, someone who didn't know anything about themselves, someone who would rather put all their care into others.

I just sat there, thinking. It wasn't until a couple hours later that Vinny asked if I wanted company and ended up coming over.

When I let him inside, he gave me a look.

"What?" I asked, closing the door behind him.

"How was your contemplation?" he asked, walking toward the living room. "Find out anything interesting?"

I let out a breath, following him. "No, not really."

"Why are you stressing about this?" Vinny asked, plopping down on the couch. I sat beside him, my thigh brushing against his.

"I've just been thinking a lot lately, after everything that's happened over the last few weeks," I started. "It's been overwhelming. I know it's been worse for you-"

"You don't need to do that," he interjected. "You can have your feelings without worrying about mine."

I sighed, shooting him a grateful look.

"It's been overwhelming," I repeated. "And so I tried to stop thinking about it by thinking about myself and I realized I barely even know myself. I don't know what I wanna do for my future. I have no goals or aspirations. I'm just *here* ."

Vinny was staring at me intently, all his attention directed at me.

"And it's frustrating I guess," I admitted, rubbing my fingers through my hair nervously. I felt stupid for complaining about this to Vinny. His own

problems were worse than mine, but here I was, making him listen to my superficial issues. "Forget it. It doesn't really make sense."

"Yes, it does," Vinny argued. "And I... I'm, uh, I'm sorry I never noticed you felt like this."

My face fell. "Vinny, *I* didn't even know I felt like this until recently."

I could already tell what he was thinking. He thought that I had paid more attention to him than he had to me. And he thought that somehow made him worse than me. But the truth was, I should have known what was going on with him long before I did. I wasn't nearly as intuitive as he thought I was.

"I guess it just made me realize I don't think about myself a lot," I continued. "And *that* made me realize I have *no* plans and don't even know where to start."

Vinny nodded, his hand twitching where it rested on his leg. I wanted to reach out and grab it. It turned out, I didn't have to. Vinny grabbed ahold of my hand, and rested it on top of his thigh. This was something friends did, surely.

"I know I'm not really the most optimistic person," Vinny started, rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb. "But if there's one thing I really believe in, it's you. And I think you'll figure it out. You just have to give yourself time, prioritize yourself. That's what Dr. Brown says to me, anyway."

My chest warmed at his words and I wanted to pull Vinny into my lap and hug him close to me all night.

"She also talked to me about maybe starting to journal," Vinny continued, looking down at our hands and then back up at me. "I think I'm going to do it. Maybe you should too. Write down your thoughts, maybe you'll learn something."

"Who are you and what have you done with my Vinny?"

He rolled his eyes, bumping his shoulder with mine.

"You ruined it," he said, shaking his his.

I laughed, pulling my hand away from his to throw my arm around his shoulder.

"I'm just saying, you're being so... different. A good different."

"I'm just trying to be there for you the way you always are for me," he said. "I'll stop though because you don't appreciate it."

I laughed again, louder this time, and pulled him closer to kiss his cheek.

"Yes, I do," I assured him. "I really do."

Vinny pushed my face away from him, but I saw the hint of a smile that he was trying to hide. I held him close and he didn't pull away.

At that moment it didn't matter that we were sitting closer than friends were. We were comfortable. We needed this.

And I was content with this. For now at least.

***

Vinny Taylor

Before I had made my way over to Carson's, I spent an hour in therapy.

I walked into the office three minutes late, and Dr. Brown was already in the waiting room like she was anticipating my late arrival. Dad had finally decided to let me drive to therapy by myself now that he was sure I wouldn't just skip it, and he had told Dr. Brown that so that if I did, she could contact him.

"Were you expecting me to be late?" I asked her as she led me out of the waiting room and back to her office.

"That's how most of my teenage patients that drive themselves are," Dr. Brown replied. "I was simply predicting. But I knew you'd be here. I bet we have lots to talk about."

"We do," I grumbled. I could barely remember the last time I'd had a session with Dr. Brown. It seemed like it was years ago. So much had happened since then.

The two of us walked into her office and I sat down in one of her cushioned chairs. She sat across from me and leaned back.

"Would you like to start by catching me up on what's been going on with you?" she asked, crossing her right leg over her left.

I let out a long sigh. "So much has happened I don't even remember what you know and what you don't know."

"Well, our last session was a family session just before Thanksgiving," she started. "And we talked about your rape. You seemed to feel guilty for keeping that from your family. Do you want to discuss that?"

I nodded. "I did feel guilty I guess, that they thought it was them that made me the way I am now. Mostly Dad. I don't make things easy for him and he blames himself for a lot and I just let him think for so long that it was him."

"Your father blames himself for reasons beyond you," Dr. Brown replied. "His guilt has nothing to do with you, and I think you need to understand that before you can truly stop feeling guilty."

I didn't know if I could accept that answer, but I nodded anyway. Things with Dad were complicated, and I didn't know if I could completely absolve myself of why he felt guilty.

I caught Dr. Brown up on the rest of what had gone on since our last session, and even she showed a little bit of shock at how much I had to say, though the look of surprise was fleeting.

"So we *do* have a lot to talk about," she said. "We might have to go over our hour."

"No can do," I said, shaking my head. "Part of what gets me through this is knowing it's only an hour."

"Let's circle back to what you said about the tension between you are your dad about pressing charges," she replied. "Your dad wants you to press charges and you don't want to and that's causing friction, am I right?"

"Yes," I said. "I get it. He wants me to get justice or whatever. I just don't think it's likely. I'm trying to move on."

"And do you think that'll be easier after having to face Darren?"

I contemplated for a moment.

"I think so," I ultimately answered. "I think seeing him, talking to him, gave me some kind of closure I guess. It kinda got me over my fear of him a little bit."

Dr. Brown nodded. "Most people, when they go through something traumatic, all they want is closure. The experience is burdensome and closure can help take that burden away. If you feel like you've gotten that, that's a huge step in moving forward."

"Knowing he's leaving helps a lot too," I added. "And the fact that people actually believe me about what happened."

We talked about that for a few more minutes until Dr. Brown switched directions of the conversation.

"There are a couple things you said that I really want to touch on during this session because I don't think we'll have time for everything," she said. "Of course, if there's something you really want to talk about, feel free to stop me and we'll talk about that."

"Okay."

"So, I really want to talk about you going to see Robbie and your breakup with Carson," she said. "Those things I think are really important for us to touch on, and I'm assuming you don't want to talk about Seth right now."

"Not at all."

"Okay, then let's start with Robbie," Dr. Brown continued. "Bring me through your feelings about seeing him after so long, about why you wanted to go there, about if going there helped you in any way."

"I think..." I trailed. "I think that also brought me closure, sort of? Maybe not closure, it's more like it opened something up for me."

"Can you explain that?"

"I guess it opened up the opportunity of having a relationship with him, with my siblings," I said, clearing my throat. "Seeing him... it was so easy at first and then I woke up the next morning and it was hard. That night I just opened up to him because I knew he couldn't judge me, but the next day I wanted to get away from him."

"That's normal," Dr. Brown assured me. "You admit things when you're feeling vulnerable, but then when you're not feeling that way, it can make you feel shameful. Have you called him at all?"

"No," I replied. "I haven't really thought about it. So much has gone on..."

"Do you think that's something you want to do eventually?"

"I don't know," I admitted sheepishly. "I'm not sure I really want a relationship with him. I don't want to cause more problems with Dad."

"Think about yourself and if it's something that'll be good for *you*, not him," she said. "We can talk about this more in family therapy. Maybe you two can come to an understanding about it."

I highly doubted that, but I nodded anyway.

"Do you think going there was helpful?" Dr. Brown asked.

"I guess," I replied. "I guess it was good to see that he didn't leave me for nothing. He got better, got his life together and has a family. It helped me understand him better and I guess understand my dad better too."

Dad was the only one who remembered the day he took me in. It haunted him and made him the way he was. Talking with Robbie helped me see that.

"And now let's talk about Carson," Dr. Brown said and I held back a groan. I didn't want to think about Carson dumping me, mostly because we were in a good spot right now, but also because it brought back all the memories about why he did it.

"Okay," I said. "So he broke up with me."

"After you came back from Robbie's," she added. "You told me that he said that you expected him to read your mind, that you treated him badly because he didn't fully understand you, and you didn't want to have to explain anything to him."

"Pretty much," I replied. It hurt hearing her say those things, but that was what I had told her.

"Do you understand why he would feel that way?"

"It wasn't fair to him and he knew that," I said. "It still isn't."

"Are you back together?"

"No," I said. "I don't think we will be for a while."

"Why do you think that?"

I sighed. "Because just because I'm doing okay now, doesn't mean I'll be doing this well a week from now or next month or even tomorrow. I don't want to keep putting him through that. I don't think a relationship is a good idea for me right now."

To be fair, I knew that it wasn't a good idea at the start, but I fell for him. And I let my affection for him blind me from seeing the problems with

myself.

"I think it's a good thing that you can recognize that," Dr. Brown told me. "Relationships are very tricky, no matter who you are. Why do you think it's not a good idea for you?"

"I wasn't ready for one when I started dating Carson and that ended up hurting the both of us," I said, drumming my fingers on the arm rest of the chair. "And I'm just not ready still. I think I have to focus on *this*, on me, on understanding myself better."

Dr. Brown nodded. "I think that's a good idea, but I think you need to forgive yourself too."

I raised my eyebrows at her. "Forgive myself?"

"You are still hurt over the way you hurt Carson," she started. "And from what you told me before, the two of you are on good terms. You need to take a deep breath and forgive yourself. I can see the tension in your shoulders. You're holding onto so much right now, you need to let some of it go."

She continued, "Vinny, it's okay to let some of it go. It's okay to stop feeling guilty about everything as long as you acknowledge your wrong doings and try to make amends. Right now, you are free of the shackles of bottling everything up inside you. *Let go* . Feel the emotions, feel the pain, and then release it."

It felt like words I wanted to say were lodged in my throat.

"You're free of Darren and Seth, you're free of wondering about Robbie," Dr. Brown kept going. "You're free of staying with Carson even knowing it was hurting him."

I nodded along, still not able to say anything.

"So, yes, I think you need to forgive yourself," she said. "I think you need to spend more time thinking about yourself and your feelings. Journaling

could help. That's something I do and it helps with channeling your emotions. Being able to read your entries back to yourself give you a look at how your brain works."

"I don't know how to forgive myself," I said in a whisper.

"You do it just like you do anything else," Dr. Brown said. "You take one step at a time."

I felt tears leak from my eyes that I didn't even feel coming.

And somehow this felt like the first step into forgiveness.

**

Hi everyone. thanks for reading! Reminder there is going to be one chapter after this one then the epilogue and bonus chapters eventually.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! That was our last session with Dr. Brown. How did you think it went?

58

Carson Hughes

June, day of graduation

This was simultaneously an end and a beginning. An end to high school and childhood, and the beginning of the rest of my life.

I was happy to finally throw my cap up in the air and walk off the football field where our graduation was held. It was hot, the ceremony was long, and I wasn't sitting near any of my friends.

Logan and Dana were already together by the time I found them, Logan's arm around her and Dana's hand on her very pregnant stomach as they talked to the Taylors and my mom. Dana was only two weeks away from her due date and we were all anxiously waiting for baby Taylor.

"Hey sweetie!" Mom called out, holding her arms out for me to walk into. "My high school graduate!"

I laughed as I pulled her into my arm, then hugged Jeff and Val before standing between Logan and my mom.

"The three of you get close for a picture," Mom demanded, holding up her phone. Val nodded in agreement, taking out her own phone.

"I'm really going to have it immortalized that I looked like *this* on graduation day," Dana said, gesturing toward her stomach.

"Hush, you look beautiful Dana," Val told her. "And we can show little baby Taylor she was at your graduation."

Logan and Dana had found out they were having a girl, but they were being secretive with names, so all of us had taken to calling her "baby Taylor" since Dana had already decided the baby would take Logan's last name.

The three of us posed for pictures, and as we did, Isaac, Archie, and Hadley came up behind us and joined.

"Where's Vincent?" Jeff asked, looking around the crowded area for his other son.

"He's with his friends," Logan answered, gesturing to where Vinny stood with a group of people.

Since Vinny joined the track team, he had come out of his shell a bit and made some new friends, along with Spencer and Marina. His relationship with those two was a lot better than it was, but I wasn't sure it was ever go back to how it was before everything happened.

Val went over to Vinny's group and took some pictures of them together. Then, she took pictures of just Vinny, Spencer, and Marina before bringing Vinny and Spencer over to us.

Vinny said some parting words with Tyler, one of his track teammates, and brought Spencer over to the group. Spencer immediately went to Isaac's side and the two shared a kiss.

Vinny came to my side with a small smile and bumped his hip into mine.

"Hey," he said.

I grinned. "Hi."

Mom and Val stood in front of the two of us, taking candid pictures as we both looked at each other.

"Okay, now look at the camera," Val said, holding her phone in front of her face.

Vinny threw his arm around my waist and planted a giant grin on his face. I looked down at him with a smile for a moment just as Val snapped another picture, before throwing my arm around Vinny's shoulders and looking at my mom and Val.

There had been moments of weakness around Vinny over the last few months, and I always suspected there would be. Sometimes it was stolen kisses as the two of us sat up in the tree in the park, other times one of us found our way into the other's bed, but nothing serious ever came of it. Vinny was still healing, and so was I to a point, but he had been doing so well and I wasn't going to be the one to ruin it by trying to get him into something he wasn't ready for.

That was my mistake when we first started dating. I had told him not to worry, that we would work out and everything would be okay, and things had ended up okay, just not in the way I had meant.

But even without being with him, being his friend and watching him grow and find happiness had been good enough for me. More than good enough.

"How much you want to bet my grandmother is already at the house?" Vinny asked me as the others in the group were talking. Jeff and Val had planned a cookout graduation party for Logan, Vinny, and Dana for a couple hours after graduation, and that was where we would all be headed after this.

"She's probably there and wondering why no one else is there two hours before the party starts," I agreed, earning a chuckle from Vinny.

Vinny and I still had our arms around each other, and it didn't seem like either of us wanted to be the first to let go.

"So, I guess we'll see you all at the house?" Jeff asked everyone, motioning for his son to follow. The Taylors said their goodbyes and I kissed Vinny on the cheek before he left.

My mom was smiling as we walked side by side to the car, her hand clasping Paul's who walked on her other side.

"Are you really this happy about me graduating?" I asked her as we made our way to the car.

"Yes," she said in a melodic tone. "And about seeing you with Vinny, but I suppose you don't want me to mention that."

I laughed. " *Mom* ."

"You two are just so sweet together, I can't help but be happy about it," she said. "I know you're waiting on him, but he seemed just as happy to be on your arm."

Mom had largely stayed out of my dilemma with Vinny mostly because I had told her everything she needed to know about it and trusted me to make the right decisions for myself. So, she kept her mouth shut when she saw the two of us sitting closer than friends do on the couch when I invited him over to watch TV, or when she saw the two of us discretely hold hands, or when she saw us kiss each other goodnight before Vinny went home.

But she had recently made it clear that she thought we should be together, and I had to let her down easy. It just wasn't going to happen yet, not until Vinny said it was.

He was still working on himself, and he wasn't the only one. I had taken on thinking more of myself and learning what my goals and aspirations were. After taking Vinny's advice about journaling, it was something I did every day, and reading my writing back to myself had opened my mind to who I really was.

I was someone who was nervous for what the future held, someone who had a lot of uncertainty in myself. And finding these things out about myself made me realize I wanted to go away for college. I wanted to go somewhere far enough away where I wouldn't just be with the same people I knew in high school. I would be away from my friends and have to be independent.

But I would also have to be away from Vinny and the thought of that stung.

***

Vinny Taylor

It was chaos as soon as we got home. Grandma was waiting for us on the porch with an impatient frown and Dad looked like he was about to crash the car into a tree when he saw her.

"I'm not going to let her ruin this day," he said through gritted teeth as he parked the car. "We're going to have a nice day with family and friends."

I rolled my eyes at him. Therapy had done wonders for my dad, but there was no willing away his family. No therapist was that good.

"Hopefully Robbie actually shows up so she doesn't accuse me of not inviting him," Dad said, stepping out of the car. I got out behind him.

"He's going to show up," I said. "I talked to him yesterday."

Dad and Robbie's relationship was still strained at best, but I could give him credit for at least trying to mend things for me.

Once we got up to the porch, Grandma immediately put us all to work. She was going on and on about how we should have already been home and how she calculated how long it was supposed to take us to get back from the school. I tended to drown her out nowadays. She was just noise in the body of an old woman.

I ignored her demands and went up to my bedroom to change out of my graduation clothes. She almost followed me up the stairs until Dad pulled her back. That woman was crazy, but she was bothering me less and less.

My room was nowhere near a refuge, but it was still better than having to deal with her commands. The bedroom had changed a lot over the last few months. I talked with Dr. Brown and she had suggested that rearranging it and getting new furniture could make it feel like a different room, that I could trick my brain into thinking it wasn't the room where my assault happened.

I couldn't tell if it had worked or if I had just learned to live with it better than before. What Darren had done to me still haunted me in this room. I still had that look of animalistic anger etched into my brain as a permanent

fixture, and I didn't think that would ever go away. But I learned to live with it.

What Darren had done to me was something I used to think about every day. It was always replaying in the back of my mind, always forcing me to remember. But now there were days I hadn't thought about it at all, and that felt like progress to me. My brain was the one thing I couldn't escape, and it was finally giving me a break.

It probably helped that Darren ended up leaving town and never coming back. He and his family abruptly packed up and left one day. I wasn't sure anyone actually knew where they went, but last I heard, they were long gone and had no intentions of coming back here, not after word spread around town about what Darren had did. A lot of people seemed to believe it which was surprising to me. I guessed Seth's reaction to the whole thing didn't do Darren any favors.

Seth had been stuck in juvenile detention for a while now. His trial had gotten pushed back a few times, but he missed the rest of our senior year. He could rot in there for all I cared.

There was a knock on the door just as I was changing my shirt.

"Come in," I called out and a moment later, Carson walked into the room.

He had changed out of his graduation clothes into a pair of shorts and a dark gray t-shirt with his chosen college's name on the front. I hated the reminder that he was leaving at the end of the summer, but appreciated it all the same. This summer would be the only time I had with him before our lives would drastically change. Carson was going to a college four hours away, which didn't seem far, but it was far enough that seeing him during the school year couldn't be a regular thing.

Carson had talked to me before he chose this school and I wondered if he was hoping I would have asked him not to go. But I wouldn't be the one to hold him back. I didn't want that looming over my head. So, Carson committed to going to school there, and I would stay close to home. I purposely chose a school close to home because I wasn't entirely sure that

living at school would work out for me. I needed somewhere close enough in case I wanted to move back home. That, and I wanted to still be able to see Dr. Brown and see my niece when she arrived.

Dana was going to be doing online classes and Logan had gotten some construction job. Our parents were more than happy to have them and their grandbaby here.

"Your grandmother is going insane down there," Carson told me with a chuckle, sitting down on my bed, my new bed that was now pushed up against the opposite wall.

"That's why I'm up here," I replied, throwing a t-shirt on. "She was waiting for us when we pulled in."

"Why is she being extra crazy today?"

"I think it's because Robbie's coming," I said, shutting my closet. "It's going to be the first time the whole family's together in like ten years or something."

I sat beside him on the bed and he grinned over at me. I didn't want to think about him leaving, but it was all I could think about. I wanted to be with him, but I still wasn't sure I was ready for that commitment, if I could handle it, and adding long distance on top of that wouldn't work.

I leaned in and kissed him slowly, his mouth still forming a grin as or lips touch. The kiss was more like a caress, a soft touch, a loving welcome.

"What was that for?" he asked as I pulled away. "Not that I'm complaining."

"I guess you're just hard to resist," I said with a shrug, earning a laugh from Carson.

I stood up from the bed and held my hand out for Carson to take before pulling him up after me.

"We better get down there before Grandma explodes," I said. "And to keep Dana company. She doesn't like my grandmother, for obvious reasons."

When Grandma found out Dana was pregnant, she was furious. Not because of the pregnancy itself, but because none of us told her and she found out only when Dana started showing. Then, at Dana's baby shower that Mom threw at the house, Grandma told anyone who would listen that *that* was how she found out. Dana was embarrassed about it and it caused yet another fight between Dad and Grandma.

Carson and I made our way downstairs and found Dana sitting down on the couch with her feet propped up. She was only two weeks away from her due date, so her stomach was large and she was tired. Back when we had found out about Dana's pregnancy in November, she had already been around seven weeks pregnant, so that put her due date in mid-June.

"How are you feeling?" I asked her, sitting beside her on the couch, Carson on my other side.

"Ready for a nap," she said. "And for baby Taylor to be out of me already. She's been pushing on my bladder all day."

"Only a couple more weeks," I consoled with a smile.

"Then Uncle Vinny can babysit while I nap for a week straight," Dana replied with a smile of her own.

Before I could say anything else, Grandma came into the room with her hands on her hips.

"What are you three doing?" she asked. "Get up! We are nowhere near ready!"

"I'm going to hit this woman," Dana said through gritted teeth.

"Get out," I said to Grandma. She didn't move and instead stared at me as if she could will me to stand up with her mind.

"Mom! Leave them alone!" Dad called out from the kitchen.

"They need to be put to work!" she yelled back.

Logan walked in a few moments later with an irritated expression.

"You're not making my pregnant girlfriend do physical labor," Logan told her. "And stop bothering her and let her rest before everybody comes over."

"Fine, but I was never this lazy through any of my pregnancies," Grandma said and I swore I saw Dana's eye twitch.

"Alright, let's go," I said, standing from the couch to get Grandma out of the room. I could deal with her if that meant keeping her from bothering Dana.

Carson, Logan, and I ushered Grandma out of the living room and into the kitchen where Dad was putting together some food dishes. We spent the rest of the time helping get everything ready before people started showing up. Aunt Marcy and her family showed up early as they always did, followed by the rest of my aunts. The only one of that side of the family missing now was Robbie.

"Why isn't Robbie here yet?" Grandma asked in a frustrated tone. I wanted to snap at her and tell her that the party hadn't even started yet, and he would be here when the normal people got here, but I bit my tongue.

Grandma wanted to take all the credit for Robbie and Dad finally being able to stand being in the same space as each other, but the truth was it had nothing to do with her and everything to do with me. Dad would have been content with never speaking to Robbie again, no matter what his own mother said, if I hadn't decided I wanted Robbie in my life. But Grandma thought that her constant pestering that made him change his mind.

Our friends started showing up around the time of the start of the party. Dana had gotten her rest and came outside as the guests started arriving. All of Logan's friends had congregated at a table in the yard, and I was about to join them before some of my own friends started showing up.

Tyler from the track team had ended up becoming a good friend of mine. He ran with me and got me ready for track season before it started. A few of the others from the track team had befriended the both of us, and by the end of my senior year I had more friends than I ever had in my life.

My friends from the track team, Tyler, Jordan, Ashley, and Samantha, arrived together and Tyler threw his arm around my shoulder when he greeted me.

"I know, you're glad we're finally here," Tyler joked. "I know you were anxiously waiting for our arrival."

I shoved him away from me and he let out a loud laugh.

"If that's what you want to tell yourself," I replied.

Eventually we made our way over to Logan and his friends. Spencer and Marina showed up, Spencer and Isaac sitting so close together it seemed like they were fused at the hip.

I glanced over at my grandmother from across the lawn and I could tell she was starting to get even more agitated. Robbie still wasn't here, and if he didn't show up soon, she was going to cause a scene. Luckily, just as the thought crossed my mind, Robbie, Kristie, and the kids walked into the backyard.

"I'll be right back," I said to the others, before getting up and walking toward them. I spared a glance at Carson who was watching me as I left.

Grandma had beaten me to Robbie. She was fussing over him, then over the kids, and Robbie was grimacing until he saw me and a smile sprouted on his face.

"Hey, congratulations," he said, walking over to me and tossing an arm around my shoulder. I could barely get out a "thanks" before the kids barreled into me, rushing away from their grandmother and slamming into my stomach in a hug.

"Vinny!" Bailey exclaimed, her arms tight around my waist. Oliver smiled up at me but didn't say anything.

I smiled down at them, putting an arm around each of them. It had been strange getting to know them, not because they were strange kids, but

because I had spent my whole life only having Logan as a sibling, and now I was an older brother. I didn't feel fit to be an older brother, someone they looked up to. I didn't know how to be a role model for them.

It didn't take long for the rest of my aunts to come and surround us. They all had this weird obsession with Robbie because they felt like they had to hover over him because of his past, and he felt like he had to let them.

I slowly walked away with Kristie and the kids following me until we reached my parents, Cass, and Paul.

"You should go save Robbie from them," Mom told Dad and he shot her an incredulous look.

"And why on earth would I do that?" he asked. "So they can all come over here? No thanks."

"He can handle them," Kristie said with a chuckle.

"Hi, Uncle Jeff," Bailey greeted, Oliver sending him a wave.

Dad looked down at them with a fond smile.

"Hi kiddos."

That was another big reason Dad had agreed to mending his relationship with Robbie. He had seen me forming a relationship with my younger siblings and he felt bad about missing out on their lives.

Robbie had somehow managed to get away from his mother and sisters and rushed over to where the rest of us stood. He and Dad exchanged nods in greeting and that was it. Mom and Kristie shared knowing looks. The two of them were the reason any time Dad and Robbie saw each other it wasn't in complete silence. Mom claimed that she and Kristie were letting Dad and Robbie mend their relationship at their own pace. It just so happened that their pace was actually at a snail's pace.

Cass eventually had to leave because she had a shift at the hospital, so I brought her over to where mine and Logan's friends sat so she could say

goodbye to Carson. He stood up and hugged his mother, then came over to me as she walked away.

"Do you want to go inside for a little bit?" Carson asked me quietly, his lips almost against my ear.

I looked back at our friends. Archie was talking loudly about something with Tyler that the others didn't seem to be all that interested in. Then I looked back at Carson and grabbed his hand, starting to pull him toward the house.

"Are you two seriously going to fuck right now?" Archie yelled, gaining the attention of nearly everyone in the yard. Logan punched his shoulder, and Carson and I hurried into the house to free ourselves from their stares.

"I seriously don't know why you keep being friends with that idiot," I huffed, sitting down on one of the couches in the basement.

Carson chuckled, sitting down beside me and pulling me against him.

"He can be funny sometimes," Carson said. "But also annoying."

I settled into his hold, leaning into him, savoring the feeling of him holding me like I would never feel it again. Carson's embrace was the most comfortable place in the world. It was like being held in the clouds, feeling serene and away from the harsh world below. But Carson was more than a place. He was comfort and care, communication and love. He embodied those things. He *was* those things and that made me love him through all this time.

"You know, I really love you," I told him after a few moments of silence. "I love you and I'm going to miss you when you leave in the fall."

Carson let his hand travel up and down my side. "We have all summer."

"But that's all we have," I said, turning his his grip so I could face him. "And I don't know whether we should keep things going as they are or try to make the most of it."

"What do you mean?"

"We can stay friends or we can be... more," I started. "But if we do that, it ends when you leave. If you even still want to be with me..." I grimaced. I had just thought out loud without taking into consideration that Carson may not even have wanted me in that way anymore.

"Vinny, of course I do," Carson said, letting out a shaky breath. "I didn't choose to leave for school to leave *you* . I just... I thought it would be best for me."

I nodded. I wanted Carson to do whatever was best for him. Even if it meant leaving me and hurting me in the process.

"When you leave, it's going to hurt, no matter what," I said, leaning my head on his shoulder. "So why don't we just try to make the best of it for the summer. I still don't know if I'm emotionally stable enough for a long term relationship anyway, but definitely not a long distance one."

Carson frowned. "So what are you saying? You want to date, but only for the summer?"

"I mean, it's not that different to what we're doing now," I said.

"I guess you're right about that."

"If we make it official, it's just going to hurt more when you leave," I reasoned. I didn't want to disappoint him, but the thought of him leaving at the end of summer filled me with dread. It was going to hurt, there was no avoiding that. I would just have to embrace that pain.

"You're right," he agreed. "So, what now? We're a summer fling?"

I grinned at him. "If you want to say it like that, then fine. But I know your mother just left for work and your house is empty for the rest of the day."

Carson's eyes lit up at that, and he sent me a grin of his own.

"That's true," he said. "My house is empty, and no one would find us there."

"So I guess we should go there."

"And miss out on your party?" Carson had a teasing look on his face, and I wanted to tease him back.

"Remember a few months ago when I asked you if you'd have sex with me?" I asked and I swore I saw him gulp. Carson wordlessly nodded. "Is your answer still yes?"

Carson nodded. "Yeah." His voice was high pitched and rushed.

"Okay. Because I'm ready now."

With that, Carson and I stood up from the couch and rushed upstairs to get out of the house without anyone noticing. Luna was asleep on the couch, but the sound of us scurrying through the living room woke her up. She lifted her head up to look at us and I pat her head as we rushed though the living room. She put her head back down as we left through the front door.

The ride to Carson's house felt longer than it ever had before, even with Carson speeding to get there. When we did finally get to the house, Carson led me inside and shut and locked the front door behind us. I leaned back against the door and he rested his hand beside my head.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked me breathlessly. "Because just because we're here doesn't mean we have to do it. We can just hang out if you want."

That was how I knew I was sure. Because Carson was the person I trusted most in this world. I knew that if I ended up saying no just then, he would respect that and never hold it against me. I knew if I changed my mind in the middle of it, he would stop immediately. Most of all, I knew that he wanted this just as much as I did but was still willing to wait for me.

"I'm sure," I said, leaning in and pressing my lips to his jaw. "I want to do this. I trust you," I murmured against his skin.

Carson let me continue kissing him for a few moments before he brought his hands to my thighs and hoisted me up. I wrapped my legs around his

waist and he pushed me back against the door, taking my lips with his. His lips were fast and needy, making it hard to keep up with him.

I smirked against him. "Slow down," I said. "I want to savor this."

And so, he slowed down and it was like he was memorizing my every movement. He brought his hand to caress my cheek while the other arm wrapped around my waist, holding me steady. My hands tangled in his hair, impossibly trying to bring him even closer to me.

Carson only pulled his lips from mine when he started bringing me toward the stairs, letting out quiet sounds of pleasure as my lips attached themselves to his neck. He brought me up the stairs and to his room before placing me down on the bed, hovering over me as he brought his lips back down to mine.

The two of us started getting undressed. It started with Carson yanking his shirt off, then helping me out of mine. I took deep breaths as Carson started working my pants down my legs. He kept his eyes on mine as if waiting for any sign of discomfort.

"Do you want to keep going?" he asked me, breathless.

"Yes," I instantly replied. "I'm okay."

Carson got my pants off then took care of his. He got what we needed out of his bedside table and started kissing down my chest and my stomach, all the way down to the waistband of my boxers. He looked up at me with his mouth still on my skin before pulling the boxers down. Carson kissed me and made me writhe beneath him before starting to prepare me for what was next.

Everything about this was so much different, so much better than every time I had ever been with someone. Everyone else I had been with willingly had been so fast paced. There was no emotion laced in our moments. It was all lust and using each other's bodies for our own benefit.

Being with Carson was nothing like that. Everywhere he touched me, I felt his emotions, his care and consideration. Every touch was was light, and when our bodies finally connected, he was gentle and careful. He was loving, moving slowly but deliberately, making me feel all pleasure and no pain. This was what love felt like.

I never had real emotional connections with anyone I had been with. With Carson, we felt the love we had for each other with every touch and every move. He held me, took care of me, and made me feel pleasure in something I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to enjoy again.

In that moment, my body was mine again. I made this choice, and what had happened to me couldn't hinder me any longer. I had control. I made the rules for my own body. And that was liberating.

After we were finished, we laid in Carson's bed, his arm around me and my head on his bare chest.

"Was that okay?" he eventually asked, his voice raspy and his tone uncertain.

I turned to face him, placing a long kiss on his jaw.

"It was more than okay," I said. "It was perfect. Was it okay for you?"

He enthusiastically nodded. "Yeah. Yeah it was amazing. Everything I hoped for."

"And we have all summer to do it as many times as we want," I teased.

Carson let out a low chuckle, kissing the top of my head.

It was probably best not to talk about the fact that we only had the summer. It would only ruin this perfect moment between us. Part of me wanted to blame myself that I had waited so long to try to be with Carson, but I knew it was no use. I wasn't ready for a long term commitment before, and I still wasn't now. And I didn't know if I would be in the fall either. This was just how it had to be.

I didn't know how long we were lying there together, but it was long enough for my phone to go off three times before I finally answered it in annoyance.

"Hello?" I snapped, leaning back against the headboard.

"Nice of you to answer your phone," Dad replied. "And nice of you to tell me you were leaving. But that doesn't matter right now. You need to get to the hospital."

"What?"

"Dana's water broke," Dad explained. "We're at the hospital."

" *What* ?" I exclaimed, jumping up from the bed and startling Carson in the process. I tucked my phone between my shoulder and my ear as I scurried around the room to find my clothes.

"The baby is coming and her Uncle Vinny needs to be here," Dad said.

"Okay, I'm on my way."

With that, I hung up the phone and quickly started getting dressed.

"What's going on?" Carson asked, a look of concern on his face.

"Dana's water broke," I told him, and he jumped up from the bed.

The two of us got dressed and raced to the hospital. We found Dad, Archie, and Isaac sitting in the waiting room. Dana had wanted Logan, Mom, and Hadley in the room with her.

"How long has it been?" I asked, sitting down next to Dad, Carson on my other side.

"Not that long," Dad replied, leaning back in his seat. "Maybe an hour at most."

We all sat in the waiting room for who knows how long. I gripped Carson's hand tightly in mine as he rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand. Archie was being surprisingly quiet while Isaac quietly spoke with Dad and Carson.

A little while later, Mom and Hadley came into the waiting room with huge smiles on their faces, and we all stood up to greet them.

"She's here," Mom said, grinning wide and putting her arm around Dad's waist.

Dad and I followed Mom back to the room they were staying in. We had to wait to get the others checked in before we could have such a large group in here. I slowly walked into the hospital room when Mom opened the door. When we got inside, Logan was sitting beside the bed, cradling the baby in his arms with a soft smile. Dana grinned over at us from the hospital bed.

"You did say you wanted this baby out," I told her, taking the seat on the other side of the bed.

"She took it to heart," Dana replied. "But that's okay."

Logan looked up and stood from the chair as Dad washed his hands in the sink near the door. Then Logan placed the baby in Dad's arms. He brought her over to me and I got a good look at her sleeping face.

She looked exactly how I expected a newborn baby to look, but the sight of her made me feel a sudden warmth. This was another little human that I would be there for, that would look up to me, and I would watch her grow. My heart swelled at the sight of her and I looked away before I could let myself get choked up. This wasn't even my kid and I was getting emotional.

"Do we get to know the name or have you not decided yet?" Dad asked, smiling down at her, swaying with her.

Logan and Dana shared a look, then they both looked at me. That filled me with dread.

"What?" I groaned.

"Her name is Vivienne," Dana said. "Vivienne Alexandria Taylor."

I frowned at that. That sounded too similar to my own name. Vincent Alexander Taylor.

Logan looked at me like he was expecting a reaction out of me.

"Change it," I said immediately, and Dad shot me a glare.

"We're not changing it," Logan said, looking at me with a serious expression.

"Well, you're not naming her that," I retorted. "Why the hell would you name her that?"

"Because we love you and our daughter is going to love you," Dana replied before Logan could say anything. It was probably a good thing too because Logan looked like he wanted to yell at me and I would yell right back. "And you've been so supportive to me through this whole thing and I wanted my daughter to have this name."

I looked at the little baby Dad still held in his arms then looked back at Logan and Dana.

"You two are crazy," I said.

"Want to hold her?" Dad asked.

"I'm good."

Logan walked over to Dad and took the baby from his arms, then he placed her into mine and I had no choice but to hold her.

"Hold your niece," Logan said, walking away.

Vivienne stirred at the sudden movement and opened her eyes, looking up at me as I stared down at her. Looking into her eyes, I felt an instant

connection with my niece. This kid was going to have my heart forever.

Later on, Logan's friends came in and out. Eventually, Mom and Dad left to go get Logan and Dana things they needed. Logan stepped out of the room to go get some food while Dana slept, leaving Carson and me in the room with a sleeping Vivienne in Carson's arms.

"She's so cute," Carson said in a low, soft tone.

"She's a newborn baby."

Carson laughed looking over at me, but he didn't say anything.

When Logan got back, he took Vivienne in his arms and Carson and I left the room, walking together slowly down the hallway.

"This probably isn't a good time, but we didn't really talk much after we... you know," Carson started, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"What is there to talk about?" I asked him, leaning back against the wall.

He glanced down at his shoes, then back to me.

"I just want to make sure we're on the same page," Carson said. "I know you said you just wanted to do this for the summer, but what if we just... see where it goes. And decide at the end of summer what happens next."

The thought of that scared me. I was scared of getting so attached, of not being able to let him go. I wanted to keep this casual, just for the summer, to protect our hearts. But I didn't want to hurt Carson in the process, to have the whole summer be painful for him because he couldn't even hold out hope for us.

"Is that what you want?" I asked.

"I want you," Carson replied instantly. "And if it's just for the summer, fine, but I want to try this again."

We stared at each other for a few moments. It was like time stood still. I thought of every possible outcome from this and all of them seemed to end in heartbreak. But I couldn't look at him at that moment and deny him. He was laying out his emotions for me and all I wanted was to grab hold of him and never let go.

"Okay," I said with a nod, smiling at him with closed lips. "We should give it a try then."

Carson's grin was so wide then that it sent tingles into my stomach. That made anything that came out of this worth it. Carson was worth the pain and the heartache I feared.

He wanted me. I wanted him. And he was worth falling for.

**

Yay I finally got this done! Thanks for reading! Today is my birthday, so I really wanted to get this done as a little birthday gift to myself and you all.

Please tell me what you thought of the chapter and be on the look out for the Epilogue!

Epilogue

Carson Hughes

5 Years Later

"Let's just get started without him," Logan said with a sigh, eyeing the door as if he could manifest Vinny appearing through it.

We had been waiting at the tux rental place for at least fifteen minutes now, waiting for Vinny to show up for the final fitting. With him being Logan's best man, Logan had wanted to wait for his brother before we started with the fitting, but we hadn't heard from him and he wasn't here.

This delay of the inevitable had made me even more nervous to see him. I knew I would have to see Vinny here and at Logan and Dana's wedding, and I wanted to just rip off the bandaid and have him be here. But of course, he was late.

I hadn't seen Vinny since January, over winter break. We had gotten in a fight then and hadn't spoken since. It was now September, and Logan's wedding was this coming weekend. I hadn't seen him for any of the other fittings and Logan didn't want a bachelor party, so this was the first time the two of us would have to see each other since our fight in January.

I didn't have to wait much longer because a moment later, Vinny burst through the door in a rush and made his way over to where the rest of us stood. He didn't even look at me.

"Sorry," he muttered, running his fingers through his hair. He had let it grow out since the last time I saw him. "My car wouldn't start. I had to wait for a ride."

"I would have picked you up," Logan told him.

"Is this everyone now?" the worker asked Logan, and he nodded. It was just a small group of us. Logan's groom party consisted of Vinny, Archie, Isaac, two of his friends from work, and me.

The worker brought Logan to the back to be fitted first, leaving the rest of us out front. Archie had started lively conversation with the rest of the group while I looked over at Vinny, who was staring down at his phone.

The months we had been apart were good to him. His hair was longer and lighter on the top like he had spent a lot of time in the sun. His skin was golden and he had bulked up some, the evidence in the way his shirt hugged his chest and upper arms. He was still my favorite thing to look at.

It seemed that no matter how long the two of us were apart, my feelings about him stayed the same. I missed him, and now that I had moved back into town after graduation, we wouldn't have to be apart. If we hadn't messed everything up all those months ago, the two of us could have finally *really* been together by now.

Our relationship since high school had always only been during school breaks. He didn't want long distance, even though I had tried to convince him our sophomore year of college we could handle it, he disagreed. So, we kept our relationship as something that happened in the summers and over winter break.

It wasn't until the summer between junior and senior year of college that it changed. I had gotten a summer internship and stayed in my college town for the whole summer. I hadn't seen Vinny that whole time. Then, our last winter break together, everything went to shit. And now here we were, seeing each other for the first time since then, and not even saying a word.

A few minutes later, Logan came out in his tux and looked in the big mirrors off to the side. The worker helping him straightened out the jacket and started talking to him about the fit.

"How does it look?" Logan asked, turning around to face us.

"You look smokin'!" Archie said, adding a whistle.

Logan rolled his eyes, but laughed anyway.

After the worker was done fitting Logan, it was Vinny's turn. He left to go to the changing room, and that was when Logan and Isaac turned to look at me.

"What?" I asked, though I knew what they were thinking.

"Are you sure things aren't too weird with you and Vinny?" Logan asked me, raising his eyebrows. "I don't want my wedding photos to look super awkward. Dana would kill you guys. And me."

Of course things were weird. Vinny and I had too much history for it not to be weird. But if I knew him as well as I thought I did, I knew he wouldn't let whatever happened with me and him ruin Logan and Dana's wedding. And neither would I.

"We're fine," I assured him.

"You didn't seem fine," Isaac said, crossing his arms over his chest. "You two could barely even look at each other."

"Are we talking about how awkward the atmosphere is in here with you and Vinny?" Archie asked, bringing himself into the conversation. "Because you could seriously cut the tension with a knife."

"What, did you two date or something?" one of Logan's coworkers, Andrew, asked.

"Only like twelve times," Archie replied.

"It wasn't twelve times, Arch," I hissed, glaring at him.

"Close enough."

The conversation ended when Vinny came back out and stood in front of the mirror in his tux. It took all my strength to not let my jaw drop in admiration of how good he looked. I had never seen Vinny so dressed up, and it made me wish I had seen him like this before.

He pulled at the tie at his neck, trying to loosen it. I knew that it must have made him uncomfortable.

I didn't even notice I had let my eyes wander to his backside until Isaac nudged me and shot me a stern look.

"It looks good on you, Vin," Logan told his brother.

When Vinny turned around, he had a miserable look on his face.

"This tie is choking me," he said.

Logan rolled his eyes. "It's not choking you."

Vinny pulled at the tie again before turning back to look at himself in the mirror.

After everyone finished getting fitted, Logan wanted us to all go out to lunch. He said this was the closest thing he would be getting to a bachelor party, so we all had to attend. I was sure he said that last part so that Vinny wouldn't try to bail.

So, the seven of us ended up at a nice restaurant up the street, and I somehow ended up seated next to Vinny. He leaned as far away from me as he could without being on top of Logan on his other side.

Other than that, lunch was going smoothly. That was until I asked Vinny if he could pass me the salt and he was so startled that he jumped and knocked his drink over onto my lap.

"Oh, fuck," he said, looking down at my soaking wet jeans. He took the cloth napkin that was sitting on the table between us and shoved it onto my lap, seemingly not realizing where his hands were as he wiped the napkin on the front of my pants.

"Vinny," I said, grabbing onto his hands. "Vinny, it's fine."

He stilled, realizing where he had just been touching me, then pulled his hands out of my grasp.

"I'm just gonna..." I trailed, nodding my head toward the bathroom. I stood up and scurried toward the restroom, hoping no one noticed the huge wet spot on the front of my pants.

I was in there for about five minutes, dabbing my pants with paper towels and standing under the air dryer when Vinny walked in. For a moment the two of us just stared at each other, him standing in the doorway and me at the dryer. Then, he walked in, letting the door shut behind him.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. "For spilling on you and uh... touching you."

"It's fine, Vin, really," I assured him, mustering up my best smile.

He clamped his teeth down on his bottom lip, clearly feeling uncomfortable with the situation.

"Are we really going to be like this?" I asked him. His eyes narrowed.

"Like what?"

"Like this awkward and uncomfortable around each other?" I added. "For Logan's wedding?"

Vinny was silent for a moment, and I could tell he was contemplating whether or not he wanted to start an argument with me in the bathroom at this restaurant.

"This isn't my fault," he finally replied through gritted teeth. "Not this time."

I knew he was right, and that was why it hurt so badly. It was entirely my fault that the two of us weren't together. I hadn't respected his wishes and tried to push him into something he wasn't ready for. Then I blamed him for the fact that things weren't working out with us when it was my own fault.

I hadn't seen Vinny at all last summer and it was because I was angry that he didn't want to move in with me for the summer while I did my internship. I had asked him, he said no, and I was upset with him for it, so

we spent the whole summer apart. Then, during winter break, the two of us went through our usual routine and he confronted me about not even visiting for the entire summer and I blamed it all on him.

*

Eight months ago, January

Vinny was acting strange and I didn't like it. We were lying in my bed after sleeping together and he wouldn't even look at me. He would barely even respond to anything I said and I was growing agitated.

"What's wrong?" I asked, sitting up against the head board.

He turned his head on the pillow and looked at me.

"Nothing," he said, but I could tell he was lying through his teeth.

"Vinny, please don't lie to me."

He sat up and fixed a glare on me.

"Fine, this has been bothering me the whole time you've been home, so maybe we should talk about it," he replied, his voice cold and low. "I don't like how you haven't even fucking brought up the fact that we haven't seen each other since March or how we've barely spoken since then until now."

"I asked you to come stay with me for the summer and you said no," I reminded him.

"I said no to staying with you for the entire summer because my job, my therapist, my friends, my family are here," he replied in an icy tone. "That doesn't mean I wouldn't have liked to visit or see you at all, but apparently it was all or nothing with you."

"It wasn't all or nothing, I was just busy Vinny," I shot back. "And maybe I thought you didn't want to see me since you said no."

"Don't blame this on me, Carson," he said.

"It is kind of your fault though!" I exclaimed. "You're so noncommittal you won't even spend a couple of months with me? You never even gave me those reasons for saying no, and it only would have been for two months, we could have figured something out. You just still have commitment issues and don't care how those issues affect me."

Vinny let out a laugh, but it was void of any humor. He stood up from the bed and pulled his clothes on. I followed him, and the two of us stood face to face, now fully clothed and glaring at each other.

"You wanna know what I think?" Vinny asked. He didn't wait for me to respond before he continued. "I think we're both so used to our issues being my fault that neither of us wanted to put the blame on you. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized this time, it wasn't me."

"Vinny, I don't want to fight with you about this, please," I said with a sigh. "There's only a week left before we go back to school. Can we just enjoy it?"

Vinny's glare hardened. "Fuck you."

And then he walked out the door.

*

The more I thought about that last interaction with Vinny, the worse I felt. He was right. I wrongfully placed the blame on him. I was hurt, so I didn't consider his own feelings or reasonings. It was all my fault.

"I know it's not your fault," I agreed. "It's mine. And I've been too much of a coward to talk to you about it because I was scared you hated me. I'm sorry."

Vinny looked down at the floor then back up at me. He sighed then walked over to the paper towel dispenser and pulled some out, handing them over to me.

"It's hard to stay mad at you when you're right in front of me," he admitted. "That's why I haven't reached out. I was waiting for you because I knew the minute I saw you, I'd forgive you."

That made me feel so much worse.

"I'm sorry," I said again, tapping the button on the dryer to start it up again as I wiped the front of my jeans with the paper towels Vinny handed me. "After lunch, do you maybe wanna hang out alone? To talk?"

I nervously awaited his response. Vinny wasn't able to say anything before a middle aged man walked into the bathroom and went to stand in front of one of the urinals.

"I'll see you back at the table," Vinny said before turning and walking out of the bathroom.

I only stood at the dryer for a few more minutes before going back to the table. My pants were still visibly wet, but at least the excess liquid was cleaned up enough that it wasn't seeping through my clothes. I reclaimed my spot next to Vinny at the table where the others had all finished their food.

"We can wait for you to finish, Carson," Logan said, gesturing toward my plate.

"No, I'll just take a box," I told him, "I'm not that hungry right now anyway."

We paid the bill and I got a box for my food. Logan was talking to Vinny about having to go pick up Vivienne from the babysitter then driving him home.

"I could drive you home, Vinny," I offered.

Logan looked between the two of us with wide eyes.

"Uh..." Logan trailed. "Is that a good idea?"

"Yeah, it's fine," Vinny told him. "I'll go with Carson."

I didn't miss the stares we got from the rest of our group as the two of us got into my car. Isaac looked at us with an unreadable expression while Archie wiggled his eyebrows in a suggestive look.

Vinny directed me to the apartment he was renting on the other side of town, but other than that, our conversation was minimal. I didn't know what else I was going to say to him. Maybe I would just apologize a hundred times and grovel at his feet until he forgave me and kissed me.

Once we were parked, he led me up to his third floor apartment. The apartment was small, but homey. It was minimally decorated, but there was a pride flag hung as a tapestry behind the couch in the living room.

"This is nice," I told him, looking around. "When did you move in here?"

"Back in May," he said, sitting down at the kitchen table and gesturing for me to sit across from him.

I sat down, and the two of us stared at each other for a few moments before I spoke up.

"I really am sorry Vinny," I started. "About not respecting your boundaries about not wanting to move with me, about the way I spoke to you and blamed you, about ignoring you. I guess I was feeling like our relationship was going nowhere and I wanted something more out of it. Instead of saying that to you, I tried to move it along without thinking of you."

"I was more angry that you never called after that," he admitted, looking down at his hands on the table. "I waited for you to call, to say you wanted to see me, and you never did. I could have gotten over everything else if you just called."

"I'm sorry," I said again. "I guess I was afraid you didn't want to hear from me. I didn't want to have to deal with you rejecting me."

Vinny nodded and looked up at me.

"What are you doing now?" he asked. "Are you staying here? Moving back there?"

"Staying here for now at least," I told him. "I don't see myself moving back there."

He nodded again.

I knew what I wanted to ask. I wanted him and I to be in a real, long term relationship now. No more summer flings, only the real thing. But I was too afraid to ask.

"Vinny, I—"

"Honey, I'm home!" some exclaimed through the apartment in a sing-song voice. A guy about our age came into the kitchen with a wide smile on his face, planting a kiss on Vinny's cheek and holding onto the back of his chair before looking at me with kind eyes. "And who's our guest Vinvin?"

My heart plummeted. It was like it was dropped from a ten story building and splattered on the ground.

"I should go," I said, standing from the chair. "It was nice meeting you. Nice talking, Vinny."

I rushed out of the apartment faster than I had ever moved in my entire life.

I was too late. Vinny had moved on without me because I was too stupid to show him that I still wanted him. If I had just called, if I had just made time for him, then the two of us could be together. I was stupid to believe that he would have waited, that he wouldn't give his time to someone who deserved it.

"Carson!" Vinny called out, sprinting through the parking lot toward me.

I was so devastated that even looking at him now made me want to cry. I was embarrassed and heartbroken and I just wanted to get in my car and cry all the way home.

"Carson," Vinny called again, out of breath. He caught up to me and stood in front of me, stopping me in my tracks. "Just..." He paused, catching his breath. "Just wait."

"Vinny, it's okay," I said, willing myself to hold onto my composure until I was alone. "I'm sorry for how I just acted, tell your boyfriend I'm sorry, but I can't—"

"Shut up for a second," Vinny snapped, still breathing heavily. "He's not my boyfriend. He's just my roommate."

"He... what?"

Vinny glared at me, his panting slowing down as he caught his breath.

"That was my *roommate* ," Vinny repeated. "And I would have told you that if you didn't run out of there like your ass was on fire."

"But he... he kissed you," I said. I was now embarrassed and trying to make myself seem less crazy.

"He's overly affectionate," Vinny replied. "If you had just let me introduce you..."

"Sorry, I just assumed," I told him with a sheepish smile. "I uh... I wouldn't have blamed you if you moved on. I was just... upset."

Vinny rolled his eyes. "Well, I didn't."

"Okay."

We stood in silence for a moment before Vinny spoke up.

"Do you want to come back up?" he asked me. "Or are you too embarrassed about your outburst?"

I chuckled. "I'm kind of embarrassed."

"Okay, well... do you want to be my date to the wedding?" Vinny asked in a rushed tone.

It was embarrassing how quickly I replied.

"Yeah," I said instantly. "Yeah, I'd like that a lot."

"Okay," Vinny said, looking down at the ground. He looked back to me when he continued. "We can ride there together or something."

"Sure, I'll pick you up."

"Cool," he said with a nod, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Cool."

I didn't see Vinny again until two days later at the rehearsal dinner, but we didn't speak much. It wasn't until the next day when I picked him up at his apartment that we spoke again.

"Does Logan know we're going together?" I asked him as we made our way to the hotel the wedding was being held at.

Vinny looked over at me, swiping his hair back over his forehead.

"I didn't mention it," he said.

"Neither did I."

I couldn't tell if that was good thing or a bad thing. Logan would undoubtedly find out that the two of us were each other's date to his wedding, and I had no idea how he would react even if we had given him a heads up about it.

"Logan's not going to care," Vinny added, pulling me from my thoughts. "He's going to be too busy with all the wedding stuff to even pay attention to us."

I let out a deep breath. "You're right."

It turned out, Vinny was not actually right. When the two of us got to the hotel and made our way to the room the rest of the groomsmen were getting ready in, all eyes were on us as soon as we entered. Logan looked like his eyes were going to pop out of his head when he noticed us walking in together, how close we were standing. Jeff stood next to his son, glancing at us.

"What the hell is going on?" Logan asked in an exasperated tone.

Archie let out a laugh before downing the rest of his champagne.

"Are you two back together *again* ?" Archie asked, continuing to chuckle.

"Shut up, Arch," I said, moving toward Logan. "We're here together, but you don't have to worry."

Logan let out a sigh and rubbed his temples with his fingers.

"At least you'll look happy in my wedding photos," Logan mumbled.

Vinny rolled his eyes and pushed past his brother to go to where his tux was hanging on the rack. His dad said something to him too quiet for me to hear, but it didn't seem like he made Vinny angry.

All of us finished getting ready and made our way down to where the ceremony was being held. There were quite a few people already there. It was mostly Logan and Vinny's family, but some of Dana's family had made it there as well, the ones that she wasn't on bad terms with.

Robbie and his family were there, and Vinny grabbed my hand to pull me with him as he went over to greet them. His younger siblings had grown a lot since the last time I saw them, but Bailey still towered over her bother Oliver.

Bailey and Oliver instantly got up from their seats to hug their older brother. Robbie stood up with them and gave Vinny a one-arm hug before greeting me with a handshake. Kristie was on the other side of the room talking with Vinny's mom, Val.

"How's Logan? Is he nervous?" Robbie asked, glancing between the two of us.

"He won't admit it, but I can tell he is," Vinny replied, looking over at me as I nodded in agreement.

Robbie nodded. "And when did this happen?" He gestured between us.

We were saved from answering by Jeff coming over and clapping Robbie on the shoulder.

"Dana's ready," Jeff told us. "We're starting."

Vinny and I scurried away, getting into our positions like we had at the rehearsal the night before. Vinny was the best man, so he stood closest to Logan. I stood next to Vinny with Isaac on my other side, Archie beside him, and the other two at the end.

The bridesmaids started walking down the aisle. A couple of them were Dana's friends she met at a young mothers group she started going to, and a couple others were her cousins. Hadley, being the maid of honor, was the last of the bridesmaids to make her way down the aisle.

The last person that walked in was Vivienne. She was wearing a light pink dress that matched the color of the bridesmaids' dresses. She took small strides as she threw flower petals out of her basket like she had practiced at the rehearsal and she had a big smile on her face. When she made it to the end of the aisle, she instantly walked up to Logan and stood beside him.

Once everyone was down the aisle, Dana arrived. She was being walked down by Jeff, who wore a huge smile on his face as he escorted her toward his son, their arms intertwined.

I glanced at Logan to see him tearing up. Vivienne stood at his side giggling a nudging his leg.

I could tell how this would be emotional for him. Dana looked beautiful. Her hair was done up in an intricate hairstyle with some curls left out to

frame her face. Her dress was a lace, strapless gown that hugged her waist and flowed out at the skirt, the train trailing behind her making beautiful patterns. It must have been overwhelming, seeing the love of your life in such a way, making their way down to you to commit to a life with you forever.

I glanced at Vinny who was smiling at Dana and got a tingling feeling in my stomach

***

Vinny Taylor

When the ceremony ended, Hadley and I walked down the aisle together, her talking my ear off as soon as we were outside.

"Wasn't that amazing?" she asked, gripping my arm. "Dana looked so beautiful. Oh, I was crying!"

"Yeah, it was nice," I said in a bored tone. The wedding was nice, and Logan and Dana looked very happy, I just didn't want to sit here and talk about it.

"Also, please tell me if something is going on with you and Carson," Hadley added. "Because I saw the way he was looking at you the whole time and it would be so embarrassing for him if there wasn't."

I didn't even want to answer that, and luckily, I didn't have to. Carson walked out with one of Dana's cousins and instantly made his way to Hadley and me.

"Carson! We were just talking about you," Hadley said, causing Carson to look at us with a confused expression.

"You were?"

I pulled him to me, wrapping my arms around his waist. Carson relaxed into my side and Hadley seemed content with this as an answer to her question.

It was bizarre how comfortable I still felt with Carson after being away from him all those months. There was an invisible connection between us, one that could never break no matter how we stretched it and pulled. It would always stay intact. I was sure the connection wouldn't be severed even if we had spent years apart. The moment we saw each other again, it would still be there.

Now that he was back in town, planning on living here permanently, I wanted to keep him forever.

Hadley eventually left us to find Dana, and the two of us stood in the corner at the cocktail hour until we were pulled away for the wedding party photos. Once we were done with that, we stood off to the side alone.

"You're going to save a dance for me, right?" I asked him with a grin.

Carson returned my smile and held out his hand for me to take.

"Uncle Vinny!" Vivienne screeched, and it took me a moment to realize she was right next to me.

"What, kid?" I asked, looking down at her, my hand still in Carson's.

"Daddy said I needed to come bother you and Uncle Carson," she said, tugging on my other hand. I sent a glare over at Logan who was currently looking quite amused with himself.

"Do you know what bother means?" I asked her.

Vivienne just shrugged and pulled on my hand harder.

"You told me you'd dance with *me* at the party," Vivienne added, changing the subject. "But you just said you're dancing with Uncle Carson."

"I can dance with both of you."

"At the same time?"

"Maybe."

When the cocktail hour ended, we walked into the reception area as the wedding party was announced. Vivienne stayed with Carson and me, so that Logan and Dana could have their first dance after they entered.

"Are you going to make a toast?" Carson asked me, leaning over as we ate our meal.

"Logan told me I had to," I told him. "Because Hadley is."

"Do you have something written?"

"I was just going to wing it," I sheepishly replied. That did nothing to ease my anxiety about the whole thing, but I thought it'd be more embarrassing to be reading off a paper the whole time.

Carson chuckled. "I'm sure it'll still be great."

I nodded, then leaned in to whisper to him. "I was thinking after the reception you could come to my room."

His eyes widened slightly. "Really?"

"Unless you'd prefer to sleep alone tonight," I teased. Carson instantly shook his head.

Dinner started winding down and the DJ motioned for me to go over to him, and that was when I knew it was time for my toast. Carson squeezed my thigh before I stood up from my seat and made my way to the DJ, grabbing the microphone and tapping on it to get everyone's attention.

"Uh, hi everyone," I started, clearing my throat. "I guess I'm supposed to make a toast. If I had known this was required, I would have never said yes to being Logan's best man." That earned me some laughter from the guests and I started feeling less nervous as I thought of what to say next.

"But I did say yes, and now I get to tell you all about how awful he is," I continued, another round of laughter greeting me. "Growing up with Logan wasn't always easy. We clashed because he was nosy and I was moody and

it was hard to imagine that anyone would want to spend the rest of their life with him."

I went on, "When he met Dana in middle school, she was all he would ever talk about. I distinctly remember telling him one day after he told me how much he liked her and wanted to date her, that she was way too good for him. And then years later when he asked her out, for some reason, she said yes."

"Ever since then, they've been inseparable. I always found it strange how Dana could put up with him, but then I realized it was because she balanced him out. She's smart, patient, kind, and graceful and he's an idiot. But he must be doing something right because his relationship has worked out a lot better than any of mine have."

I saw Carson laugh at that.

"It's like they knew as soon as they met, that they were it for each other. Most of us search for our person, going through relationship after relationship until we find them, but they got it on the first try. And because of that, I have Dana as one of my closest friends. I have my little devil niece, Vivienne. And now Dana is officially part of the family. But Dana, you've always been family."

"And I guess I should say more about Logan. He and Dana grew together through everything. And even though Logan and I clashed when we were younger, he had grown up and been there for me when I really needed him to. He's my best friend. And I'm so happy to share this day with you. I love you both."

The guests erupted with applause and clinks on glasses as I made my way back to my seat beside Carson. He put his arm around me and pulled me close to him.

"That was great!" he said, kissing my cheek.

Hadley stood up afterward to do her speech for Dana, the both of them tearing up through most of it. Her speech was a lot nicer, more well thought

out and proper.

Once the speeches were over and the cake was cut, the music started back up and Vivienne was tugging on my sleeve to take her out to the dance floor.

"Alright, alright, kid," I muttered, standing up and taking her hand in mine before leading her out to the dance floor.

All she wanted was for me to stand there and twirl her around every so often while she danced her little heart out. It was what she was looking forward to most about the wedding. When I had asked her if she was excited her mom and dad were getting married, she just shrugged and said they told her she could stay up past her bedtime and dance all night. That was all she cared about.

"Spin Uncle Vinny!" Vivienne commanded, spinning around as she did so. I followed her demands and spun around, my eyes catching Carson's fond smile as I turned around.

He had been watching us the whole time, and I couldn't help but feel giddy at the thought of Carson watching me.

Logan walked over and took Vivienne's other hand, causing her to grin up at him.

"Can I have a turn dancing?" he asked her and she enthusiastically nodded.

Logan glanced over at me. "I think someone wants to dance with Uncle Vinny."

Just as he said that, Carson walked over and pressed his hand gently on my lower back.

"Would you like to dance?" Carson asked me.

I turned to face him, pulling him close to me so that we could sway to the music together.

"I can't help but notice there has been no nagging at this wedding," Carson commented, a playful grin pulling at his lips.

I snorted. "That's because Grandma and Aunt Marcy aren't here."

"They weren't invited or they refused to come?"

"They conveniently planned a cruise for this week," I told him. "I don't actually know if Logan and Dana planned the wedding for when they wouldn't be here or if it was the other way around, but it's better this way."

"I wouldn't put it past your grandmother."

"Me neither," I said. "She sure as shit acted like it was Logan and Dana's fault and caused a huge issue last time we saw her. I don't even know the last time Dad or Robbie even spoke to her."

Carson hummed, gripping my waist tighter. I placed one hand on his hip and the other on his shoulder as a slower song started playing. Carson brought his face closer and rested his forehead on mine.

It was hard to believe that two people could spend so much time apart, yet fall back together like nothing had ever separated them. That was how it always was with Carson. That was how I knew there was no one else in this world I could love other than him.

He pulled his head back, looking at me as if he was assessing me.

"Everything okay?" he asked. "You look lost in thought."

I blinked a few times before showing him a teasing smirk.

"I was just thinking about you naked in my hotel room later," I told him.

His eyes bulged slightly, looking around to make sure no one had heard me. Or, just making sure Vivienne hadn't heard me, but I wasn't worried. She had heard me say worse.

"Don't tease me," he said. "We can't leave your brother's wedding too early."

That just made me want to tease him even more. I brought our hips together, causing Carson to let out a heavy breath.

"Did you know I'm wearing nothing underneath my pants?" I asked him, my tone playful.

Carson's lips formed a thin, tight line, and I could tell he was trying to figure out whether I was bluffing or not.

"You're being very naughty," he told me after a moment. The sound of his voice and the words that came out of his mouth made me want to drop to my knees right there in front of him.

"I guess you'll have to teach me a lesson."

"I guess I will."

The two of us were then interrupted by my mother that insisted on dancing with me, and after my dance with her, Vivienne had made her way to Carson doing the same moves she had been doing with me.

"I see you and Carson have made up," Dad said, bumping my shoulder with his as he came to stand next to me, the two of us watching Vivienne and Carson.

"Something like that," I said with a content sigh.

Dad smiled, pulling me close to him by throwing his arm around my shoulder. I rested my head on his shoulder and he hugged me closer, putting his head on mine.

My relationship with my dad had always been rocky, but years of growing up and going to therapy seemed to heal us. We still clashed at times, but that felt normal. We always would.

"Who knows? Maybe we'll be at your wedding in a year," Dad joked.

I scoffed, lightly hitting him with my elbow.

"Not likely," I said. "I don't even know if I'll ever get married."

He raised his eyebrows at me.

"I think you will," he said before glancing back over at Carson.

Carson and I had stayed at the reception until the very end, despite my trying to persuade him upstairs for the whole night. I would snake my arm around his waist, whisper inappropriate things in his ear which caused him to pull away from me with a grin. I hoped he would give in eventually, but he hadn't. Not until the room started clearing out.

Vivienne had fallen asleep on the floor in the corner, my dad picking her up to bring her up to their hotel room so Logan and Dana could have the night to themselves.

"We'll see you guys in the morning at brunch?" Dad asked, Vivienne stirring in his arms.

I had planned on staying in bed with Carson for as long as possible, but he had confirmed we would be there.

"When we show up at brunch tomorrow together, everyone's going to know we fucked," I told him as we headed for the elevator.

"Is that what we're doing?" Carson teased, bringing his hand to my ass and giving it a squeeze.

"I should have know you two would get together at my wedding," Dana said from behind us, surprising us both.

She was glowing, a smile seemingly perched permanently on her face.

"We're doing no such thing," I told her.

She rolled her eyes at me, hugging me from the side.

"I feel like I haven't been able to see you all night," she mumbled, resting her head on my shoulder. "I loved your speech."

"It was nothing."

Logan finally caught up to us and the four of us rode the elevator upstairs together.

"I guess I can assume you two will be sleeping in the same hotel room?" Logan asked, looking between Carson and me.

"Sleeping is one word for it," I replied, causing Carson to squeak in surprise.

I couldn't help it. I was ready to have him forever and I wanted everyone to know that. Logan and Dana always looked at me with pity when it came to Carson, since the two of us were never committed. Now we would be.

"I was thinking we were supposed to have sex on our wedding night, but I'm so tired," Dana said, leaning back against the wall.

"I'm so glad you said that," Logan said, looking relieved. "Because I'm exhausted."

I couldn't get out of this elevator fast enough. As much as I loved Logan and Dana, there was nothing I wanted more than to be away from them at that moment.

When we reached our floor, the four of us walked out of the elevator. Logan and Dana's room was first and they bid us a goodnight before disappearing inside it. As soon as we got into my room, I pushed Carson up against the closed door and gave him an open mouthed kiss.

He let out a sound of surprise as my mouth devoured his. I loosened my tie as I kissed him, pulling him closer to me by the tie he wore.

Carson's hands moved down my body to grab my ass, squeezing it firmly and pulling my hips closer to his. Our hips moved in sync against each other as our mouths and tongues melted together.

It had been too long since we were together like this, too long since my mouth was on his, since I could feel his warm skin against mine.

Carson moved his hands back up my body and started unbuttoning my shirt that was on underneath my suit jacket. He pulled the tie from my collar but left it dangling from my neck as he finished unbuttoning the shirt before pushing both the shirt and jacket off my body.

My hand brushed his as I went to remove the tie but he stopped me, gripping my hand.

"Leave the tie on," Carson muttered against my lips.

He pulled away looking down at my exposed abdomen, running his hand over my stomach.

"You look..." Carson trailed, biting his lip. "So *fucking* sexy."

The heat of his touch sent trembles through me.

I was happy he had noticed my small transformation. I had been working on building muscle over the last few months, and it had paid off.

"I could stand here and just look at you all night," he said.

I pressed my hand to the center of his chest, pushing him back against the door.

"Did you just swear?" I asked. "What happened to my angel Carson?"

He smiled. "I never said I was an angel."

"You are though," I told him. "Just not in bed."

He laughed, putting his face between my neck and shoulder, leaving chaste kisses on my skin.

I guided Carson over to the bed, lying him down so that I could straddle his hips. I unbuttoned his shirt and opened up the front, leaving it on. My lips

found their way to his chest, sucking on one of his nipples before trailing down his stomach and to the waist of his pants. Carson was panting, his hand gripping my hair as I rested between his legs and unbuttoned his slacks and pulled them down.

"Hey," he called out breathlessly just as I was about to pull off his boxers. I looked up at him, stopping my movements. "Were you just messing with me about having nothing on underneath?"

I shot him a mischievous grin and sat up on the bed.

"Do you want to find out?"

Carson groaned and sat up on the bed, pulling off his shirt and pants before lightly pushing me onto my back. He slowly ran his hands down my chest and stomach before rolling down the waistband of my pants to check to see if there was anything else there.

"Fuck..." he groaned when all he found was skin.

"Another swear word coming from those lips," I said with a tsk. "Now who's being naughty?"

Carson chuckled, his hands still gripping my pants.

"Can I...?" He motioned toward my pants, asking to take them off.

"Yes."

That was all it took for Carson to have me completely bare in front of him, save for the tie he kept around my neck. He took his boxers off and threw them with the rest of his clothes before leaning down to kiss me.

"How do you want this?" he asked. "You want to be on top?"

This was one of the many things I loved about Carson. My comfort always came first whenever we did something like this. It had taken a while for me to even be comfortable with the thought of having sex again, but Carson

had been patient with me and helped me figure out the best ways to make it enjoyable without sending me into a panic.

One of those was was making sure I had some sort of control or way to get out. I knew that Carson would always stop if I told him to, but part of my brain still panicked about being unable to move, about being held down or confined.

But I had grown a lot since I was seventeen. I was now twenty-two, and although those thoughts were always in the back of my mind, I had been able to somewhat move past them.

"However you want," I told him sincerely.

He sat up, pulling away from my lips.

"Vinny..."

"I'm serious," I assured him. "I trust you."

"I know you do," he said. "Are you sure—"

"I'm sure," I said. "I want you to take me in every way imaginable. I want you to choke me with this tie while you're fucking me."

He shuddered with pleasure at my words and then proceeded to do exactly as I asked him to.

Once we were too tired to continue, we laid in bed with my arms wrapped around Carson's bare stomach and his head on my chest.

"I love you," he blurted. "I never stopped."

I smiled, kissing the top of his head.

"I never stopped loving you either," I said. "Don't think I ever could."

The next morning, the two of us had sex one more time before we got ready and went downstairs to brunch. All eyes were on us when we entered the

room, Archie letting out a whistle at the two of us.

I rolled my eyes with him, walking with Carson to the buffet. We got our food and sat at the table with my parents, Logan, Dana, and Vivienne.

"You two look refreshed," Logan commented.

"Leave them alone," Dana said, smacking his shoulder.

Carson and I smiled at each other before starting to eat our meal.

This was the first time my life felt right in a while. Sitting here with my family, being with Carson, it felt like everything was exactly as it should be.

***

Six Months Later

"I can't believe you're taking my roommate away from me," my soon to be former roommate, Bobby, said to Carson as we started moving my things out of my bedroom. "What am I going to do without his good looks and bad attitude?"

Carson laughed, smiling over at me.

I had officially introduced Carson and Bobby after Logan's wedding and the incident where Carson thought Bobby and I were dating. Carson was adorably embarrassed about the whole thing, but Bobby just laughed it off and the two were fast friends.

I rolled my eyes. "You're going to be fine," I told him.

"Are you sure you want to live with him full time, Carson?" Bobby asked him. "He's a bit of a grouch."

Carson chuckled, sneaking his arm around my waist.

"I think I can handle him," he said, pulling me closer and landing a kiss on my cheek. "Even if he is grumpy."

I pushed him away which just caused the two to laugh at me.

"You two could just move in together and I'll live by myself," I offered with a huff.

Carson hugged me from behind and kissed the back of my neck as I tried to squirm away.

"You don't mean that," he said, his lips brushing my ear.

Of course, he was right. My relationship with Carson had been steadier than ever before for the last six months. It was hard to even believe that this was the first time we had spent six consecutive months together, but now there was nothing stopping us.

While I still saw Dr. Brown, I was in a much better place than I had been five years ago. I had matured a lot and had been able to figure out how to keep my emotions in check. Carson had finally moved back into town and seemed to want to be here permanently. It was like the stars had finally aligned and we could be together without any obstacles.

Carson had spent a lot of time over at the apartment with Bobby and me since he had moved back into his mom's house. It wasn't until a month ago that he suggested the two of us get a place together.

It felt like a huge step, but it also felt right.

A few hours later, we had moved most of our stuff into our new apartment and were sitting on the floor, due to our lack of furniture, eating Chinese takeout.

The apartment we were renting was closer to the side of town my parents lived on. It was close to the park, where I could just barely see our tree in the distance.

"We're going to have to go shopping for a couch tomorrow," Carson said, setting down his container of rice beside him.

"And a kitchen table and chairs," I added. "And a bed so we're not just sleeping on a mattress on the floor."

Carson groaned, leaning back with his hands behind him.

I looked at him, suddenly feeling so grateful that he was mine. His looks hadn't changed much over the last five years, but his shoulders were broader, his jaw more square. He looked like a man more than the boy I fell in love with in high school.

"Remember when you used to say *I* had a staring problem?" Carson teased with a grin, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Well, you did."

"Can you blame me?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

I glanced up and down his body. "I guess I see the appeal in staring now."

Carson laughed, causing me to chuckle along with him.

"Can you believe we're here?" Carson asked, looking around the living room. "Together. In our own place. Not that I ever felt like I wouldn't have a future with you, but it always just felt so far away."

I got what he was saying. The two of us had always *wanted* this. But wanting and actually getting were two very different things. Our relationship before was so fragile, but now we knew how to take what we wanted.

"I never knew if it was going to be possible," I admitted, crossing my legs at the ankle. "If I was ever going to be able to go this. There were times it felt like I'd never get to have this, to be in a relationship. With you."

Carson gazed at me softly and scooted over to sit beside me, resting his head on my shoulder. We were facing the window, staring out at the night sky with the lights from the street shining in. I had never felt more comfortable or serene than now, sitting with Carson in our own place.

"I love you so much," he said quietly.

I took in a deep breath, putting my arm around his waist.

"I love you too."

We smiled at each other then, knowing that everything had finally fallen into place.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the Epilogue!

Put questions here if you'd like to ask something for my end of book Q&A.

I want to thank everyone who read this book and stuck with me through the end of it. I know it was long, trust me, I *felt* it. There were times I just couldn't wait to get this done, no matter how much I loved it. Vinny is one of my favorite characters I've ever written, but he was also so hard and exhausting to write at times, but I'm so glad I got to share him. Vinny is a character that has lived in my head for a really long time. He existed before any of the characters in my other stories and before I had even started posting "Knight" or "On Thin Ice" (these three stories sort of existed in my drafts at the same time before I started posting my work), so he's kind of like my first child even though this is my third book. So I've been trying to write his story for a little over five years. I knew where I wanted this story to go, but I didn't expect it to be so hard to actually get there. I was also writing this in the middle of the pandemic, going to school, and working two jobs, so I'm proud of myself for even getting it done (even though it took a really long time). So I want to thank all of you for being so patient with me and my erratic updates and allowing me to share my stories with you. THANK YOU.

Fun Facts

1. Originally, I wasn't sure Carson and Vinny would end up together, but I love happy endings too much.

2. Vinny Taylor has existed as a character in my head for over five years. He used to be part of a different story that I never ended up finishing and scrapped it, but I loved him so much I rewrote his story into this.

3. Carson's dad was going to come back at some point, but I dropped that storyline.

4. It was originally going to be someone random that Logan saw Vinny with instead of Spencer.

5. Originally, it was either going to be Seth or Isaac that had assaulted Vinny, but after the first chapter I came up with the idea to make it Darren and sort of hide him in plain sight.

6. Spencer was never going to be gay or end up with Isaac in my original ideas.

7. Robbie was going to be in prison originally, and Vinny was going to visit him there instead of at his house.

8. At first, I was going to try to write in just Carson's POV, but then too many of my ideas revolved around Vinny and I had to write his POV. I decided to to the first half of the book in Carson's POV and the second half in Vinny's, but that ended up not working out either so I did them wherever I needed them.

9. Isaac was always going to have had hooked up with Vinny over the summer, but I contemplated different ways that Carson and everybody would find out about it. Vinny was going to be the one to admit that at one point, but I didn't want him outing Isaac. Isaac wasn't already going to know about Carson and Vinny's relationship at one point and was going to

make some offhand comment about hooking up with him. But I wanted it to be super dramatic, so I settled on how it happens.

Q&A

Thank you for all your questions!

Q: Why are you so good at writing stories?

A: Don't know why or how or if my stories are even good. They just come out of my brain.

Q: Is cereal a soup?

A: Absolutely not!

Q: Are Isaac and Spencer still together?

A: I debated in my head about this for a while about whether I would keep them together or not and I still don't know, so that's why Spencer doesn't appear in the Epilogue. When I come to a decision about it, it will probably be address in a bonus chapter.

Q: Did you ever consider not having Carson and Vinny end up together?

A: Yes. I did genuinely consider not having them end up together, but I like happy endings too much to actually go through with that. Originally, I was going to have them completely break up in the last chapter instead of somewhat being together during the summers. Then, they would rekindle their romance in the Epilogue at Logan and Dana's wedding. But when I wrote it all out, it just didn't work out that way, but I always knew I wanted the Epilogue to be them getting back together after having been broken up for a while. This was the first story I wrote that I wasn't 100% they would end up together either!

Q: Why did you decide to have them on and off? Your other books seem to have a solid happy ever after, after high school?

A: There are a few reasons for this. One major one is Vinny's mental health. I never wanted him relying on Carson for his happiness and I didn't want Carson "fixing" him, so I decided to show that Vinny wasn't overly relying on Carson by having them break up and him still being (at least somewhat) functioning and okay. Another thing about his mental health is that it causes him to lash out and be defensive and have moods, and I didn't want Carson to just have to deal with that and excuse Vinny for his actions just because of his mental health because that's not an excuse for how he treated him. I was also trying something new with the way I write relationships because in my first two stories the main characters get together and have a pretty solid relationship throughout most of it, so I wanted to try something new. I also didn't know if they were going to even end up together, so from the start I always knew their relationship was going to be rocky. I think it made sense for them to be on and off, and for them to have had some time apart toward the end before they ended up together for real.

Q: Will Archie find a partner?

A: I feel like Archie is going to be a bachelor for a while. I don't see him settling down while he's still in his early 20s.

Q: What happened to Darren?

A: I have some ideas about that that will most likely be addressed in a bonus chapter.

Q: You wrote about Carson finding himself and what he wants. What kind of profession or area do you see him going into because of this?

A: The reason I wrote that about Carson is because I have been having similar feelings about my own life, and that was a way for me to deal with what that's doing to me mentally. So I have no idea what Carson is going to do later because I have no idea what I'm going to do. That was a little piece of me that I put into his character. What I want for Carson (and for myself) is for him to find something he is passionate about. I don't want him to have to work just to make money, but to make a difference in the world and feel good about doing whatever he's doing.

Q: What happened with Isaac and Spencer?

A: In the Epilogue, I'm not sure if they're still together and this may be addressed later in a bonus chapter. Pre-epilogue, I think they spent the rest of their senior year together and at least some of college. Beyond that, I'm not sure and it's something I'm still thinking about.

Q: Is this based on a true story?

A: No, it's not. There are always true elements within my stories. Things about me, things about people I know, things I've experienced. But the story itself is pure fiction. My main characters often act as a way for me to release certain emotions by making the characters feel them too.

Q: Are there any particular books (wattpad or non-wattpad books) you would like to share that either inspired your stories or that you feel have similar vibes to your stories?

A: I honestly can't think of any with similar vibes to this one, but there are some with similar vibes to my others.

If you use kindle or have Kindle Unlimited (these are all on Kindle Unlimited): 1. CU Hockey series by Saxon James and Eden Finley is five books of gay college hockey romance
2. Kiss and Cry by Keira Andrews is gay Olympic figure skating romance
3. Reading the Signs by Keira Andrews is gay professional baseball romance Wattpad stories:

1. Hidden Play (and its sequel) by HarlemDiggity is completed. They're basketball players, it's angsty, read it now!!!
2. The Thing About Glenn Pearson by 2WantLoveAnd2BeLoved is completed. So cute, love this couple, and they're tennis players!

Q: What happened to Spencer and Isaac? And with Spencer's dad and Carson's mom?

A: I think Spencer's dad (Paul) and Carson's mom (Cass) are still together. The wedding in the Epilogue was originally going to be theirs but I thought

it would be more realistic for Vinny and Carson to both be there if it was Logan and Dana's.

Q: Do your characters from all your books exist in the same universe? If so, have you ever thought of doing a crossover bonus chapter?

A: I haven't really thought of the other characters while not writing their book, but I also haven't really considered them to be living in different universes, so I consider my books to all be in the same universe. A crossover bonus chapter could happen if an idea for it comes to me, but that hasn't happened yet, so we'll see.

Q: Will there be bonus chapters for this book?

A: Of course! I don't know when they will be posted though.

Q: Will Carson and Vinny ever get married in the future or even adopt kids?

A: I think that Vinny would initially be anti-marriage. He'd want to just be with Carson and not have to go through the whole ordeal, but eventually he wants to get married because he sees how much Carson wants to get married and he wants to make him happy. I think they will eventually adopt kids. Like with marriage, Vinny would be reluctant about adoption at first, but he's had practice taking care of kids because he had helped out with Vivienne. So after marriage, they will decide to adopt one or maybe two kids.

Q: Is Vivienne going to get her own story?

A: Probably not, but she will make appearances in bonus chapters.

Q: Do Hadley and Archie end up together?

A: No. Maybe they try to go there once or twice, but nothing ever comes of it, and it was never serious. They want different things in life, and I don't think they could tolerate being in a relationship with each other.

Q: Are we gonna have bonus chapters?

A: Yes, bonus chapters are coming. I just don't know when.

Q: What do Vinny and Carson do for a living?

A: Carson, I have no idea. Me and him are just trying to figure stuff out. Vinny, I think would do something with books, maybe working for a publishing company. He just is the type that can sit and read for hours and not want to have to talk to anyone.

Q: Are we gonna have an Isaac x Spencer book?

A: Most likely not. That's mostly because I have no idea what I would do with them and I don't think I could write in either of their point of views. I don't know if I could make them interesting enough to have their own stories.

Q: When are their birthdays?

A: I gave Vinny my birthday January 29th. My little Aquarius<3 I was debating between making him a Capricorn or Aquarius and ultimately chose Aquarius. I'll give Carson March 12 because he's a Pisces even though Aquarius and Pisces are incompatible signs.

Q: Are we gonna get a bonus wedding chapter for Vinny and Carson?

A: Probably! That's definitely one I want to do.

Q: Will you show the cast, like you did in OTI or no? And also what is your favorite relationship dynamic?

A: I was planning on doing a cast for this at the beginning and I just kept putting it off and at some point it just felt way too late to do it. And doing to casts takes up a lot of time. So while it's something I would have liked to do, I never got around to it and I don't know if I ever will. I have started it from a while back, but I don't even have a full collage done.

My favorite relationship dynamic is probably Fox and Elijah, but it may become Wren and Landon once I've written more of them.